Inclusion Matters: Trends and Prospects of Inclusion in Early Childhood Education

[1]Feng-Chen Lin

[1]Assistant Professor
[1] Department of Childhood and Education
[1] Mackay Junior College of Medicine, Nursing, and Management, Taipei, Taiwan
[1]jessicafclin@gmail.com

Abstract— **This research paper explores the evolving landscape of inclusion in early childhood education. It examines global regulations, the current status of inclusive education, implementation challenges, importance, future directions, and recommendations. This presentation is based on an extensive review of evidence-based articles, empirical studies, and professional literature. This paper aims to illustrate the trends and prospects of inclusive education in order to promote diversity and equity, eliminate barriers, and foster optimal learning environments for young children.**

Keywords—**Inclusion, Early Childhood Education, Diversity, Equity, Optimal Learning Environments.**

_____

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of special education has evolved to enable students with disabilities to live and learn together with regular students in mainstream educational settings. This traces back to the Normalization Principle introduced from Northern Europe to the United States and various other countries in the 1960s. This principle advocated for the abandonment of isolation measures and actively promoted universal social interaction and experiences for individuals with disabilities. The aim was to align their education, life, employment, social engagement, and leisure activities as closely as possible with the norms of mainstream society [1, 5], the approach was initially focused on special classes and schools for students with disabilities before advocating for the basic idea of the Normalization Principle starting in the 1960s. This ideology suggested that children in special education should return to a regular school life within mainstream society. Consequently, movements toward mainstreaming occurred in the 1970s, followed by general educational reforms in the 1980s. From 1990 onwards, the trends have shifted towards reforms advocating for both inclusive education and complete integration education [3, 10].

Reflecting on the significant legislative milestones in Special Education in the United States since the 1970s, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997, and the updated IDEA in 2004 (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004), it is evident that there has been a noticeable shift from an emphasis on the Last Restrictive Environment (LRE) to a focus on the spirit of inclusive education [2, 8, 30].

To date, inclusive education no longer simply emphasizes a mixed approach between general and special education, characterized by the previous binary system, or the superficial concept of placing disabled students in regular classrooms [4] Instead, it emphasizes inclusion, offering multiple placement choices within a unified system that combines general and special education, focusing on the establishment and provision of an entire support system [8, 10, 15]. This broader inclusive education aims to benefit all students with special needs.

Figure 1. What is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?

## II. GLOBAL REGULATIONS AND CURRENT STATUS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The development of inclusive education in the United States advocates for the placement of all disabled students in general education environments. It acknowledges that regular schools have a responsibility to eliminate any barriers hindering the participation of disabled students in school or social activities [2]. This emphasis stresses that disabled students in regular educational settings must achieve the ability to "enter" general education environments, actively "participate" in all educational activities, and progress through these activities [13, 32]. The "National Center on Education Restructuring and Inclusion" defines "inclusive education" as providing equal and effective educational opportunities for all students, including those with severe disabilities, placing them in local schools and age-appropriate classes. This approach ensures the necessary assistance and related services to enable students to fully participate in society and contribute positively [21, 22]. Kirk, Gallagher, and Anastasiow (2003) also highlight the aim of inclusive education, which is to provide education for all students and to provide support tailored to the learning needs of each student.

In 1994, under the initiative of 92 countries, United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) unveiled the "Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education" in Spain [38]. This marked the first United Nations declaration and action plan on the development and promotion of inclusive education policies. The document includes five key points:

i. Promotion of the practice of inclusive education in all educational settings to respect and facilitate learning for every student, including those with disabilities.
ii. Emphasizing the right of students with special educational needs to learn alongside regular students.
iii. Encompassing a broader range of students with special needs beyond those with physical and mental disabilities, such as minority ethnic groups, remote regions, socio-culturally disadvantaged areas, resource-deprived areas, and gender minority students [9, 25, 38].
iv. Key practices in implementing inclusive education: legislation for inclusion and special needs, establishment of inclusive schools, international cooperation on inclusion, and comprehensive teacher training.
v. The ultimate goal of inclusive education is to establish a society based on equal values through education, ensuring equal human rights, freedom from discrimination and fear, fostering a friendly and inclusive society.

In 2006, the United Nations announced the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 1 of the Convention explicitly outlines its purpose: To promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. Article 24 specifically addresses education, stating that persons with disabilities have the right to education [17]. To achieve this right without discrimination and with equal opportunities, integrated education systems and lifelong learning should be ensured at all levels of education.

The development of inclusive education has a detailed trajectory of regulations, branching out under the concept of equal human rights. This idea is universally being implemented and practiced worldwide in various forms.
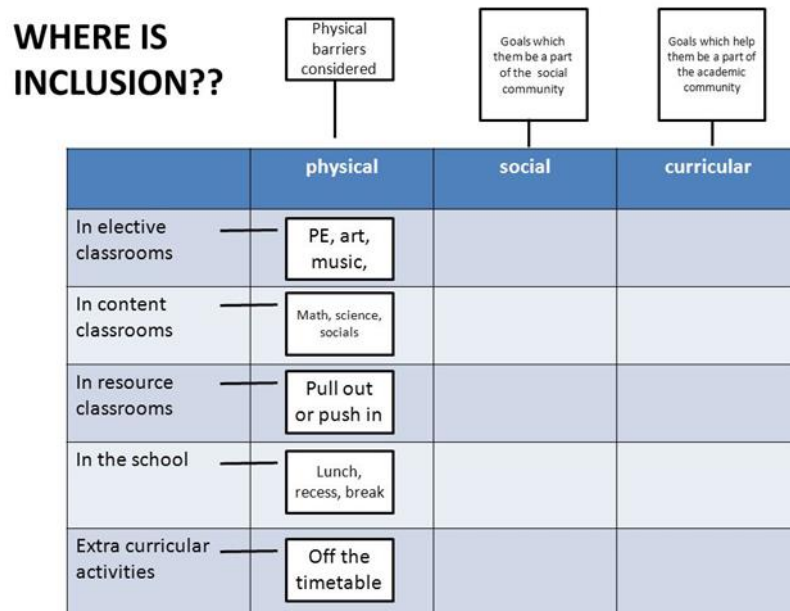
Figure 2. Where Is Inclusion in Your School? Physical, Social, or Curricular Activity

III. THE IMPORTANCE AND CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING INCLUSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

For the most effective approach to inclusion in education, it's essential to commence during early childhood. Inequalities in learning and various child development outcomes surface even before primary schooling [6]. Thus, the most efficient strategy involves addressing educational disparities at their origin by taking action as early as possible. Research demonstrates that quality Early Childhood Care and Education contribute significantly by mitigating disadvantages experienced at home, ensuring that underprivileged children begin life on par with their more advantaged counterparts [14].

Moreover, the early years of childhood serve as a crucial phase when fundamental values and attitudes toward society and others are established [31, 38]. Within this context, it is significant to instill values and attitudes in early childhood education that endorse inclusion, equality, social justice, empathy, and respect for others.

Despite progress in inclusive education over the last decade, disadvantaged children still face higher chances of exclusion. Here are factors that influence the implementation of inclusion programs in early childhood education:

i. Immigrant children: Language barriers may hinder participation and elevate dropout risks for children not fluent in the language of instruction. Immigrant children often face discrimination, receiving negative comments on their appearance and that of their parents [25]. Such experiences in preschool can hamper academic success, economic mobility, and adversely affect self-esteem.

ii. Poverty: The wealth gap significantly impacts pre-primary education attendance, with children from affluent families seven times more likely to attend than those from impoverished families.

iii. Place of residence: Urban dwellers are 2.5 times more likely to access pre-primary education than rural residents. Rural children, even when enrolled, often encounter untrained caregivers and inadequate facilities [8].

iv. Disparities between lower- and higher-income countries: There is significant inequality in early childhood intervention support between lower- and higher-income nations, impacting child development, risk management, and developmental difficulties [11].

v. Parental education, ethnicity, language, and disability: Offspring of mothers with secondary education or higher are five times more likely to attend pre-primary programs compared to those with mothers who have primary education or less. Children with disabilities face a higher risk of being excluded from school. Access barriers exist, with some parents struggling to find inclusive services, and others opting out due to safety concerns [34].

vi. Teacher training: Inadequate in-service training and mentorship for educators limit their capacity to cater to the diverse needs of children in an inclusive manner.

IV. TREND AND PROSPECT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Before Inclusion in Early childhood education is a critical stage for children with special needs, laying the foundation for their future academic success and personal growth. As educators strive to provide the best possible learning experiences for exceptional young children, they are constantly adapting and evolving their practices to meet the changing needs of today's society. Some evidence-based researches have explored current trends and perspectives for inclusion in early childhood education shaping how children learn and grow in the childcare and preschool setting.

i. Assistive Technology Integration in Early Childhood Education: Technology has become an integral tool in modern education, revolutionizing how children learn and interact. In early childhood education, technology integration goes beyond screens; it includes interactive learning tools, adaptive software, and assistive devices catering to diverse learning needs. Evidence supports that judicious use of technology enhances cognitive skills, fosters creativity, and augments learning experiences by providing personalized and engaging content tailored to individual abilities [4,13, 34] .

ii. Emphasis on Social-Emotional Development: The nurturing of social-emotional skills lays a vital foundation for a child's holistic development. In inclusive early childhood settings, a strong emphasis on social-emotional learning cultivates empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation. Research underscores that children who receive comprehensive social-emotional education exhibit improved behavior, stronger interpersonal relationships, and better academic performance [6, 18]. Inclusive environments foster a sense of belonging, creating safe spaces for emotional expression and mutual understanding among diverse peers.

iii. Environmental Sustainability in Education: Integrating environmental sustainability into early childhood education instills a sense of environmental stewardship and responsibility from a young age. Educators are incorporating eco-friendly practices, nature-based learning, and lessons on conservation into the curriculum. This approach not only nurtures an appreciation for the environment but also instills a sense of respect and responsibility towards the planet. Studies highlight that early exposure to environmental education fosters eco-conscious behaviors, shaping future generations as environmentally aware and proactive global citizens [28].

iv. Universal Design for Learning (UDL): UDL principles cater to diverse learning styles and abilities, ensuring that educational materials and methods are accessible to all children. It is meaningful to use this human-centred approach to apply in any context to guide the inclusive design of an activity, lesson, event or process. The following figure shows 6 stages of UDL thinking that we can use a UDL approach to guide the design of inclusive learning environments, including what do we know about learners and context? What are we here to do? Identify potential barriers to learning, identify universal supports, and use UDL guidelines to design learning. To ensure learners' best performances, it is important to teach, evaluate, and revise continuously [26, 30].
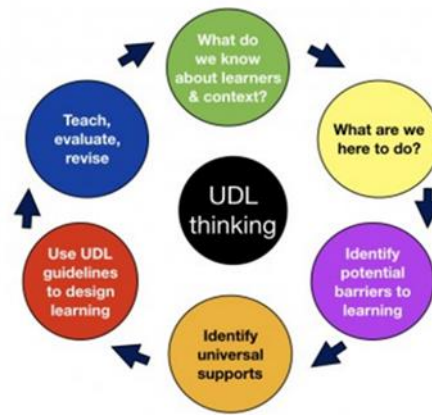
Figure 3. Using a UDL Approach to Guide the Design of Inclusion Learning Environment

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the prospects of inclusive education by exploring evidence-based practices, this article conducts an extensive review of scholarly articles, empirical studies, and professional literature. It examines how these practices promote diversity, address barriers, and cultivate optimal learning environments for young children.

Practices in Inclusive Education

Numerous evidence-based practices support the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood settings. These practices encompass diverse strategies, including:

i.   Collaborative Team Approach: Collaboration among educators, specialists, families, and community stakeholders enhances the effectiveness of inclusive education, facilitating a supportive and cohesive learning environment [16].

ii.   Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs): Tailored plans based on individual needs enable personalized learning experiences, ensuring equitable opportunities for all children.

iii.   Early Intervention Programs: Early identification and intervention services significantly impact a child's developmental trajectory, mitigating challenges and fostering early skills acquisition [15]
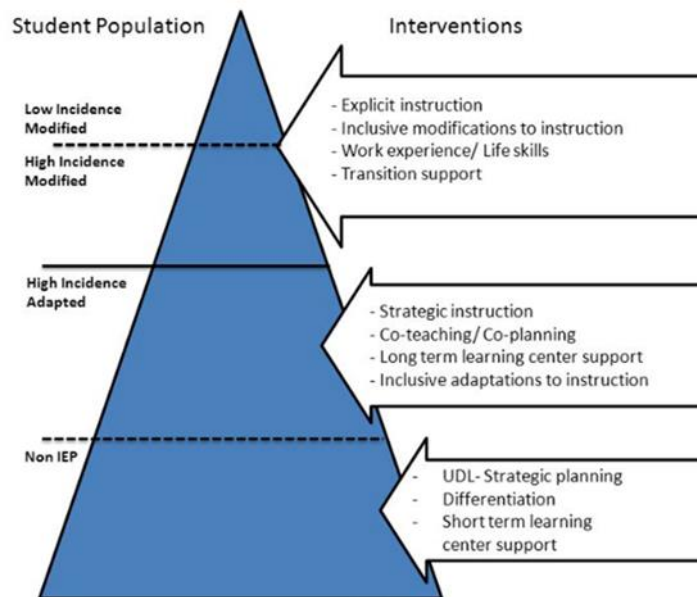
Figure 4. Interventions for Student Population with Different Levels of Disabilities

Challenges and Opportunities

While inclusive education holds immense promise, it is not without challenges. Limited resources, inadequate training, attitudinal barriers, and varying support systems pose significant obstacles to its successful implementation. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and communities [10, 21]. Furthermore, the prospects of inclusion in early childhood education present numerous opportunities to enhance learning experiences, promote diversity, and cultivate inclusive mindsets among young learners.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Looking ahead, the future of inclusive education in early childhood settings relies on several key areas:

i.   Professional Development: Continuous training and support for educators to equip them with inclusive teaching strategies and methodologies [22].

ii.   Policy Advocacy: Advocating for inclusive policies at local, national, and international levels to ensure equitable access to education for all children.

iii. Family Engagement: Strengthening partnerships between educators and families to create supportive and inclusive learning environments both at school and home [15].

iv. Research and Innovation: Encouraging ongoing research to explore innovative practices and interventions that further enhance inclusive education [10, 16].

V. CONCLUSION

The trends and prospects of inclusion in early childhood education encompass several crucial elements: valuing diversity and equity to ensure each student's inclusion and equal opportunities, embracing personalized learning tailored to diverse learning styles and individual needs, engaging families, communities, and stakeholders for collaboration beyond classrooms, encouraging social interaction among students to foster empathy and readiness for a diverse society, acknowledging the pivotal role of educators and the need for ongoing professional development, and advocating for supportive policies at various levels to translate the concept of inclusive education into a tangible reality for all learners [12, 36].

The future of inclusive education holds promise in creating more inclusive societies, promoting diversity, and providing equitable educational opportunities for all students. As it continues to evolve and gain global acceptance, it possesses the potential to transform educational systems, benefiting not only students with disabilities but all learners.

REFERENCES

[1] Abbott, L. 2006. "Northern Ireland Headteachers' Perceptions of Inclusion." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10: 627–643.

[2] Ahmmed, M., U. Sharma, and J. Deppler. 2012. "Variables Affecting Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education in Bangladesh." *Journal of Research in Special Educational Need*s 12 (3): 132–140.

[3] Alton-Lee, A., Dalton, L., Diggins, C., Klenner, L., Rietveld, C. and Town, S. 2000. Inclusive practices within the lived cultures of school communities: Research based studies in teacher, learning and inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 4 (2): 179 – 210.

[4] Baker-Ericzen, M. J., M. G. Mueggenborg, and M. M. Shea. 2009. "Impact of Training on Child Care Providers' Attitudes and Perceived Competence Towards Inclusion. What Factors Are Associated with Change?" Topics in Early Childhood Special Education 28 (4): 196–208.

[5] Ballard, K. 2003. " Including ourselves: Teaching, trust, identity and community " . In *Inclusion, participation and democracy: What is the purpose?* , Edited by: Allan, J. 11 – 32. The Netherlands : Kluwer Academic Publishers .

[6] Ballard, K. and Macdonald, T. 1998. " New Zealand: Inclusive school, inclusive philosophy? " . In *From them to us: An international study of inclusion in education* , Edited by: Booth, T. and Ainscow, M. 68 – 94. London : Routledge .

[7] Ballard, K., Purdue, K. and MacArthur, J. 2003. " Competent and confident children?: Te Whäriki and the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education " . In *Weaving Te Whäriki: Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document in theory and practice* , Edited by: Nuttall, J. 131 – 60. Wellington : New Zealand Council for Educational Research .

[8] Bishop, R., Mazawi, A. and Sheilds, C. 2005. *Pathologizing practices: The impact of deficit thinking on education* , New York : Peter Lang .

[9] Carr, M., May, H., Podmore, V., Cubey, P., Hatherly, A. and Macarney, B. 2000. *Learning and teaching stories: Action research on evaluation in early childhood. Final report to the Ministry of Education* , Wellington : New Zealand Council for Educational Research .

[10] Carr, M., May, H. and Podmore, V. 2001. 'The child's questions': Programme evaluation with Te Whäriki using 'teaching stories' , Wellington : Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington .

[11] Carr, M., Hatherly, A., Lee, W. and Ramsay, K. 2003. " Te Whäriki and assessment: A case study of teacher change " . In Weaving Te Whäriki: Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum in theory and practice , Edited by: Nuttall, J. 187 – 212. Wellington : New Zealand Council for Educational Research .

[12] Chhabra, S., R. Srivastava, and I. Srivastava. 2010. "Inclusive Education in Botswana: The Perceptions of School Teachers." Journal of Disability Policy Studies 20: 219–228.

[13] Dalhberg, G. and Moss, P. 2005. Ethics and politics in early childhood education , London : Routledge .

[14] Deluca, M., C. Tramonta, and M. Kett. 2013. "Including Children with Disability in Primary School: The Case of Mashonaland, Zimbabwe." Unpublished Report.

[15] Dight, A. and MacArthur, J. 2000. Transition with a truckload of professions . Childrenz Issues , 4 (1): 39 – 45.

[16] Dunn, L. 2004. Developmental assessment and learning stories in inclusive early intervention programmes: Two constructs in one context . New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education , 7 (1): 119 – 31.

[17] Fleer, M. 2005. Developmental fossils – unearthing the artefacts of early childhood education: The reification of 'Child Development' . Australian Journal of Early Childhood , 2 (6): 2 – 8.

[18] Florian, L. 2010. The Concept of Inclusive Pedagogy: Transforming the Role of the SENCO, 61–72. Buckingham: Open University Press.

[19] Florian, L., and H. Linklater. 2010. "Preparing Teachers for Inclusive Education: Using Inclusive Pedagogy to Enhance Teaching and Learning for All." Cambridge Journal of Education 40 (4): 369–386.

[20] Foucault, M. 1977. Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison. New York, NY: Vintage Books, Random House

[21] Graham , L. Paper presented at the Annual American Educational Research Association Conference . April 11–15 , Montreal , Canada. The incidental 'other': A Foucaultian interrogation of educational policy.

[22] Granlund, M. 2013. "Participation – Challenges in Conceptualization, Measurement and Intervention." Child: Care, Health and Development 39 (4): 470–473.

[23] Gunn , A. , Child , C. , Madden , B. , Purdue , K. , Surtees , N. , Thurlow , B. and Todd , P. 2004 . Building inclusive communities in early childhood education: Diverse perspectives from Aotearoa/New Zealand . Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood , 5 (3) : 293 – 308 . (doi:10.2304/ciec.2004.5.3.4)

[24] Heckman, J. J. 2011. "The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education." *American Educator* 35 (1): 31–35.

[25] Imms, D., M. Granlund, P. H. Wilson, and B. Steenbergen. 2017. "Participation, Both As a Means and an End: A Conceptual Analysis of Processes and Outcomes in Childhood Disability." *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurolog*y 59 (1): 16–25.

[26] Lee, F. L. M., D. Tracey, K. Barker, J. C. M. Fan, and A. S. Yeung. 2014. "What Predicts Teachers' Acceptance of Students with Special Educational Needs in Kindergarten." *Australian Journal of Educational and Development Psychology* 14: 60–70.

[27] Lynch, P., S. McCall, G. G. A. Douglas, M. T. McLinden, and A. Bayo. 2011. "Inclusive Educational Practices in Uganda: Evidencing Practice of Itinerant Teachers who Work with Children with Visual Impairment in Local Mainstream Schools." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 1 (6): 1360–3116.

[28] Lepper , C. , Williamson , D. and Cullen , J. 2003 . Professional development to support collaborative assessment . Early Education , 33 (Spring/Summer) : 19 – 38 .

[29] MacArthur , J. , Kelly , B. and Higgins , N. 2005 . " Supporting the learning and social experiences of students with disabilities: What does the research say? " . In Learners with special needs in Aotearoa New Zealand , Edited by: Fraser , D. , Moltzen , R. and Ryba , K. 49 – 73. . Palmerston North : Dunmore Press .

[30] Macartney , B. 2009 . Understanding and responding to the tensions between deficit discourses and inclusive education . Set: Research Information for Teachers , 1 (1) : 19 – 27 .

[31] Majoko, T. 2016a. "Inclusion in Early Childhood Education: Pre-service Teachers' Voices." *Early Child Development and Car*e 186 (11): 1859–1872.

[32] Majoko, T. 2017. Inclusion of Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce in Mainstream Early Childhood Development in Zimbabwe. *Early Childhood Development and Care*.

[33] Mandina, S. 2012. "Bachelor of Education In-service Teacher Trainees' Perceptions and Attitudes on Inclusive Education in Zimbabwe." *Asian Social Science* 8 (13): 227–232.

[34] Millar , R. and Morton , M. 2007 . Bridging two worlds: Special education and curriculum policy . International Journal of Inclusive Education , 11 (2) : 163 – 76 .

[35] Moore , G. , Molloy , S. , Morton , M. and Davis , K. Paper presented at the 34th International Association for Educational Assessment Annual Conference . September 7–12 , Cambridge , UK . Narrative assessment and equity for disabled students

[36] .Parasuram, K. 2006. "Variables That Affect Teachers' Attitudes Towards Disability and Inclusive Education in Mumbai, India." *Disability and Soc*iety 21: 231–242.

[37] Subban, P., and U. Sharma. 2006. "Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education in Victoria, Australia." *International Journal of Special Education* 21 (1): 42–52.

[38] UNESCO. (2006). Guidelines for inclusion: Ensuring access to education for all. Paris, UNESCO