Challenges and Opportunities for Inclusion in Early Childhood: A Meta-Synthesis of International Qualitative Research

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Hello!

Emily Holden, EdS NCSP

PhD student

School Psychologist

Early Childhood Instructional Guide

Jaleesa Steward, MEd

PhD student

Director of Special Education

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Where are we when it comes to understanding inclusion?

Benefits for children with disabilities

- Gains in language, social, and cognitive development (Odom et al., 2011)

- Increased opportunities for peer interaction & learning (Strain & Bovey, 2011)

Benefits for children without disabilities

- Positive academic, social, and personal outcomes

- Greater compassion and empathy when peer interactions are supported (Soukakou et al., 2024)

Statistics around inclusion

- Inclusion rates vary widely across states and internationally

- 0% of children in special schools (Thailand/Timor-Leste) vs. 97% in Kyrgyzstan. (UNESCO, 2020)

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Quality Inclusion

- Defined by access, participation, and supports (DEC/NAEYC, 2009)

- Goes beyond physical placement, emphasizes belonging, engagement, and developmental outcomes (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; Odom et al., 2011)

- Inclusion is both a process and a goal, ensuring all children feel welcome and achieve meaningful learning (UNESCO, 2020)

Teacher voice

- Direct teacher voice may help bridge the divide between practice and research (Buchanan et.al., 2009)

This study explores what early childhood educators perceive as the barriers to inclusion and what they feel they need in order to promote quality inclusion.

Theoretical Frameworks

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Anderson, 1997)
- Assumptions:
    - Change is a process
    - Accomplished by individuals
    - Change is highly personal
    - Involves developmental growth in feelings and skills
    - Can be facilitated by a variety of factors
- Dimensions
    - Stages of Concern
    - Level of Use
    - Innovation Configurations
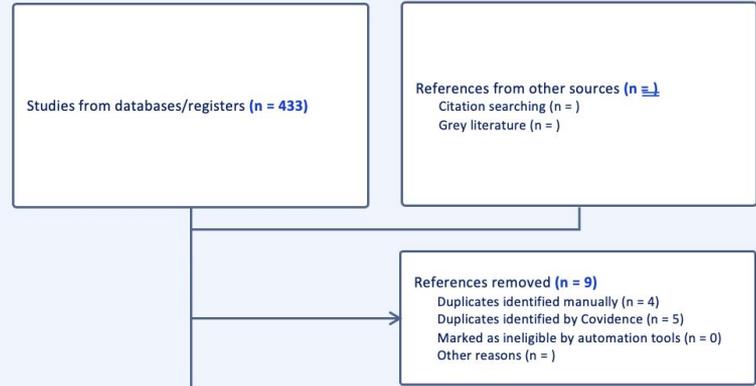   - Change Facilitators and Interventions

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Methods

PRISMA using Covidence software

- Initial Search
- Title Abstract Screen
  - IRR (92% agreement on random 20% selection)
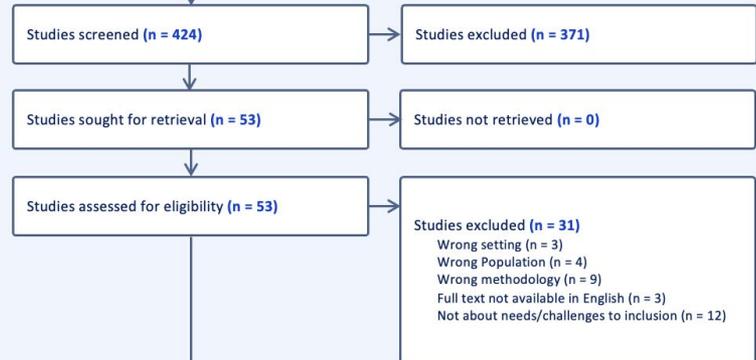- Full Text Screen
  - IRR (83% agreement on all articles)

Challenges to IRR

- Terminology around ECE
- Qualitative "light"

Identification

Studies from databases/registers **(n = 433)**

References from other sources **(n =)**
- Citation searching (n =)
- Grey literature (n =)

References removed **(n = 9)**
- Duplicates identified manually (n = 4)
- Duplicates identified by Covidence (n = 5)
- Marked as ineligible by automation tools (n = 0)
- Other reasons (n =)

Screening

Studies screened **(n = 424)** → Studies excluded **(n = 371)**

Studies sought for retrieval **(n = 53)** → Studies not retrieved **(n = 0)**

Studies assessed for eligibility **(n = 53)** → Studies excluded **(n = 31)**
- Wrong setting (n = 3)
- Wrong Population (n = 4)
- Wrong methodology (n = 9)
- Full text not available in English (n = 3)
- Not about needs/challenges to inclusion (n = 12)

Included

Studies included in review **(n = 22)**

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Process for Included Studies

Data Extraction

- Country of Study
- Qual vs Mixed
- Data Collection Method
- Disabilities Represented
- Reporters
- Relevant Demographics
- Identified Challenges
    - Themes
- Identified Needs
    - Themes

Metasynthesis

- Constant Comparative Analysis
    - Initial Coding
    - Axial Coding
    - Identification of themes
- Relevant quotes within codes/themes

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Challenges

Teacher Capacity & Professional Preparedness

- Minimal coursework on inclusive education in teacher prep programs

- Limited disability-specific knowledge (e.g., autism, communication, behavior)

- Inconsistent or inaccessible professional development opportunities

- Reliance on short workshops vs. sustained coaching/mentorship

- Teachers report low confidence and feelings of unpreparedness

- Teacher workload and well being

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"I lack comprehensive training to address the full range of needs among children with disabilities as my teacher training course exclusively exposed me to basic theory of inclusion such as behaviour management without any practice in inclusive classrooms" (Majoko, 2017)

Challenges

System & Policy Implementation Barriers

- Policies on inclusion exist but are inconsistently applied in practice

- Curricular frameworks often vague or open to interpretation

- Lack of clear, practical guidance for teachers on how to implement inclusion

- Weak accountability and monitoring of inclusive practices

- Gaps between national legislation and everyday classroom realities

- Limited information sharing and collaboration

- Systems that don't adapt to children's developmental and learning needs

"Teachers found the guidance on inclusion too vague or open to interpretation." (Hamilton & Vermeren, 2016)

Challenges

Resources & Structural Barriers

- Overcrowded classrooms with high enrollment

- Inadequate teaching materials, equipment, and facilities

- Disparities in resources across geographic areas

- Limited funding and inequitable distribution of support

- Staffing shortages

"We do not have sufficient toys and learning materials to support guided play for children with disabilities."(Cade, 2022)

Challenges

Beliefs, Perceptions, and Biases

- Some educators hold contradictory beliefs that are ableist or deficit-based, often viewing preschool teachers as "babysitters" or undervaluing early childhood education compared to K–12.

- Parents of non-disabled children sometimes oppose inclusion, expressing concerns about peer interactions and showing a preference for segregation.

- Parent involvement can be challenging when families deny their child's diagnosis, struggle with stigma, or resist cooperation, highlighting the need for ongoing parent education and partnership.

- Systemic bias in cultural and societal attitudes continues to hinder broad acceptance of inclusion, reinforcing stereotypes and separation.

"Some people consider us babysitters because we don't have SOLs." (P2); "I think from the outside it looks like we're just babysitting." (P3); "[People don't understand] that it's not just daycare." (P4); "I think the hardest thing for people on the outside to understand is that it's not a babysitting service, it is a school, and it is an education service." (P6) (Bryant, 2018)

Challenges

Student-Level Barriers

- Students may present behavioral issues that disrupt learning.

- Some children display aggressive behaviors that require careful intervention.

- Developmental complexities often add to the challenge of meeting diverse needs.

- Addressing these challenges demands resilience and specialized skills from teachers.

"Behavioural problems due to the child's special needs and aggression towards teachers and other children make it difficult. These situations are the most challenging and require excellent resilience from the teacher." (Puksand & Lilleoja, 2024)

Needs

Training Needs

- Preservice
- Ongoing PD
- In-context, ongoing coaching
- Topics
  - Theory and Practice
  - Universal Design for Learning
  - Behavior Management
  - Instruction

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""If teachers could be given training in inclusive practices,
they would feel more confident and capable."
(Pansiri & Mhlauli, 2020)

Needs

Personal Needs

- Educators need motivational support
- Educators need to be given agency and flexibility to individualize instruction
- Educators need to be resilient

"If teachers get encouragement from parents, government and society, we'll be more committed and willing to foster IECE. It doesn't mean we wouldn't do our best. Encouragement and praise are good like incentives."
(Ackah-Jnr & Fluckiger, 2023)

Needs

Interpersonal Needs

- With Families
  - Effective collaboration and communication structures
  - Support and buy-in
- With Colleagues
  - Effective collaboration and communication structures
  - Peer support
  - Clear, consistent plans and implementation support
  - Leadership support
- With Children
  - Basic skills prior to entry in inclusive settings
- Community Partnerships

""I think ideally being able to partner with the parents is the most important thing and having an open line of communication with them is probably what is going to be the most helpful."
(D'Agostino & Douglas, 2021)

Needs

Resource Needs

- Teaching resources
  - Including: curricula, assistive technology, materials, funding
- Learning Spaces
- Staffing
  - Adequate number of staff to provide needed supports
  - Staff who are knowledgeable, consistent, and positive
- Time
  - For planning, individualization, collaboration, and coaching

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"I need appropriate technology for learners with special needs in my classroom. Such include tape recorders, walking supports, hearing aids, large-print textbooks, typewriters, computers, projectors, tape recorders, wheelchairs, mirrors and acoustic floors. I also need adequate toys, textbooks, chalkboards and games for typically developing children."
(Majoko, 2018)

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Needs

System-Level Needs

- Disability awareness and stigma reduction
- Professionalization of and respect for ECE
- Legislative support with clarity around implementation of legislation
- Innovation in inclusive models
- "Better" assessment processes

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"If there is no universal support, this work scares me;
I feel powerless and unprofessional."
(Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020)

Limitations

Search process

- Library access
- English-only
- Only peer-reviewed material

Analysis

- Terminology
- Only US researchers

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Implications

For Research

- Consider other stakeholders perspectives
- Inclusion of quant
- Evaluation of specific changes
- Clarity of ECE terminology

For Practice

- Preservice education
- Ongoing PD/coaching
- Clear communication and collaboration structures

For Policy

- Investment in teacher prep & professional development
- Clearer and consistent policy guidance around inclusion
- Workforce wellbeing and retention

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Included Articles

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