

Inclusive Teaching for Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Education Settings

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is essential for all children, including those with disabilities, providing equal opportunities for learning in age-appropriate, mainstream settings. Despite legal frameworks and pedagogical advancements promoting inclusivity, challenges persist in early childhood education settings regarding the effective integration of children with disabilities. This article reviews current literature and recent surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive teaching practices. It critically analyzes the barriers to implementing these practices within early childhood educational environments and examines the role of various stakeholders, including educators, families, and policymakers, in fostering inclusivity. Research highlights the importance of early intervention and tailored educational strategies to support the cognitive and social development of children with disabilities. However, issues such as learning segregation, insufficient educator support, and systemic barriers continue to hinder the full integration of these children into mainstream classrooms. Surveys conducted by the Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA, 2023) reveal significant gaps in inclusive educational settings. To overcome these challenges, the article suggests enhancing educator training, improving curriculum designs to accommodate diverse learning needs, and increasing collaboration with families to create personalized learning plans. Moreover, it emphasizes the need for more vigorous legal enforcement of existing standards and more robust advocacy to ensure that all children receive equitable educational opportunities regardless of their abilities. This paper calls for a multidimensional approach that includes policy reform, community engagement, and

pedagogical innovation to create more inclusive early childhood education settings that accommodate and celebrate diversity in learning abilities and styles.

Keywords: Inclusive education, disabilities, early childhood, educational strategies, advocacy, curriculum development, legal standards, community engagement

Introduction

Inclusive education is crucial in ensuring that children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, should have ample opportunity to learn together in age-appropriate classrooms. According to Ferfolja et al. (2018), understanding the social dimensions of equity, diversity, and inclusion in educational settings is essential. This understanding helps explore how socioeconomic and cultural factors, diverse learners with different learning abilities, and children with special needs or disabilities influence educational outcomes and guide educators in addressing these disparities. Research by the Department of Education (2005) underscores that inclusive and accessible early childhood learning experiences lay a good foundation for more inclusive adult lives. The Children and Young People with Disability Australia [CYDA] (CYDA, 2023) states that every child should have access to health, learning equality, housing, and a secure social environment. However, according to the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS] (NDIA, 2019), many young children with disabilities in Australia seem to lack this access still. Therefore, this article aims to advocate for effective inclusive teaching practices that accommodate children with disabilities in early childhood education settings who will become adults in society in the future.

Early intervention and appropriate teaching strategies tailored to individual learner's needs are crucial for their overall development, particularly for those with learning disabilities. Also, every child, regardless of disabilities, should have access to high-quality and inclusive early childhood education for their own cognitive and social development (CYDA, 2023). A survey conducted by CYDA in 2023 reveals notable challenges in integrating students with disabilities into standard school settings in Australia. The survey, comprising feedback from 505 young individuals with disabilities and their families and caregivers, emphasizes persistent issues such as learning segregation, continuous exclusions from school activities, and insufficient support from educators within schools. Additionally, nearly half of the students reported that they experienced bullying, and a significant portion faced restraint or exclusion.

The survey results point to a need for substantial reforms to ensure true inclusivity and support for students with disabilities, emphasizing the development of inclusive school cultures. Duncan et al. (2021) also note a rising trend in such discrimination alongside an increase in the decentralization and autonomy of schools. As schools become more autonomous, there could be less oversight from central authorities such as the Department of Education, potentially leading to increased discriminatory practices. Furthermore, Dickinson et al. (2023) reported that the exclusion of students with disabilities in education is still ongoing, emphasizing the critical need for early childhood education and care settings to be better equipped and supported to ensure these children are included early and benefit from the provided educational and support services.

Literature Review

Research has consistently shown that inclusive educational practices not only enhance the social skills and learning outcomes of children with disabilities but also cultivate a sense of belonging and acceptance among all students (Geens and Vandenbroeck, 2013). Inclusive education involves several components: physical inclusion, where students share the same learning environments; social inclusion, which ensures all students feel welcomed; curriculum inclusion, providing accessible learning materials; and systemic inclusion, which addresses educational disparities (Department of Education, 2005). These practices are designed to create an educational space that accommodates all differences, promoting equality and reducing the educational gaps often experienced by students with disabilities. Schools can foster an inclusive atmosphere that benefits all by integrating students in the same learning environments and providing necessary support. Despite these established frameworks for inclusion, numerous barriers still exist that obstruct its successful implementation. These include cultural biases and the overwhelming nature of specialized resources, which often segregate rather than integrate (Chainey, 2023). Furthermore, advocacy for inclusive practices frequently falls on the shoulders of families and caregivers, emphasizing the need for systemic changes to support these efforts more robustly (Churchill, 2021).

Recent technological advancements and social media have played a transformative role in advocacy and inclusion. Platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook have become vital in raising awareness and pushing for changes across educational sectors (Churchill, 2021). As mentioned earlier, a survey by CYDA (2023) showed the ongoing

challenges within Australian educational settings, where a significant percentage of students with disabilities remain in segregated environments or face exclusion from school activities. This data implies that practical implementation tends to fall short despite the theoretical frameworks in place. It, therefore, calls for a need to enhance school culture towards genuine inclusivity, improve teacher training, and develop personalized and effective learning plans for students with disabilities.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education [DSE] 2005, discrimination against students with disabilities in Australian schools is illegal (Department of Education, 2005). These standards aim to provide equal education opportunities for students with disabilities. Despite the protective intent of these standards, recent research by De Bruin et al. (2023) indicates that they fall short in effectively safeguarding the human rights of students with disabilities to inclusive education and combating discrimination within schools. According to De Bruin et al. (2023), Krithika's son, who had ADHD and autism, illustrates this. Krithika successfully pushed for equitable treatment under the DSE, which increased his son's kindergarten attendance to match his classmates. This example highlights the critical role of educational institutions in interacting with students with disabilities to understand their unique needs and make appropriate and fair adjustments.

McLachlan et al. (2018) emphasize the need for curriculum designs that respond effectively to children's needs, interests, and developmental stages within educational frameworks. They refer to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in Australia, which promotes the development of inclusive programs. This framework ensures that all learners, particularly those with disabilities, receive personalized learning experiences crucial for enhancing engagement and development. The EYLF encourages educators to make informed curriculum decisions that facilitate participation and learning for all children through everyday activities, routines, and experiences. It supports adapting learning methods to accommodate various learning capacities and styles and promotes collaboration by inviting contributions from children and their families regarding ideas, interests, and questions (DEEWR, 2009). These curriculum adjustments align with the National Quality Framework (NQF) articulated by ACECQA (2020), which stresses a national strategy for regulating and enhancing the quality of early childhood education. Although the NQF does not explicitly mention children with disabilities, it emphasizes inclusivity and the adaptation of educational and care practices to meet the unique needs of each child. This approach helps ensure that inclusion is about

engaging all children in daily experiences rather than segregating or differentiating them based on ability (DEEWR, 2009).

Hedges et al. (2011) discuss applying the "funds of knowledge" approach in early childhood curriculum development. This approach integrates children's personal and family backgrounds into the educational setting, recognizing the culturally and socially accumulated knowledge—termed "funds of knowledge"—that children bring. Educators can better adapt the curriculum to align with children's interests and real-world experiences by incorporating this diverse knowledge into classroom activities. The theoretical framework provided by Hedges et al. (2011) suggests that recognizing and utilizing these "funds of knowledge" can create a more personalized and practical educational experience, supporting a more inclusive educational environment for all learners.

Hoffnung (2022) stresses the necessity of recognizing and addressing the needs of children with disabilities early in their development. During these formative stages, appropriate interventions can profoundly affect cognitive, social, and physical growth, optimizing developmental trajectories for these children. Theories like Vygotsky's Social Development Theory assert that social interactions are pivotal in learning processes, implying that inclusive environments could substantially benefit children with disabilities by fostering better developmental outcomes (Robinson et al., 2018; Hoffnung, 2022). These insights reinforce the value of inclusive educational settings accommodating diverse learning needs and backgrounds (Linda, 2020). Linda (2020) explores the foundational theories of inclusive education and their practical application to improve student learning. She argues that integrating contemporary educational theories into everyday teaching practices can inclusively enhance learning outcomes. This approach is critical in ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, receive equitable educational opportunities, a principle supported by legal and ethical standards (McLachlan et al., 2018). McLachlan et al. (2018) state that legal frameworks are crucial in facilitating inclusive education. They emphasize adherence to laws and guidelines that protect children with disabilities, ensuring their right to equal educational opportunities. By complying with these legal mandates, educational institutions can sustain ethical standards and foster an environment where all children can thrive.

Articulating Future Improvements and Innovations

Educators must be provided with professional development for inclusive education strategies (Waniganayake et al., 2017). Nelson (2013) supports this notion by suggesting a practical guide for educators to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles aimed at designing lessons that accommodate the needs of all students, especially those with learning difficulties. The guide explains the core concepts of UDL, which are critical in providing means of representation, expression, and engagement to support diverse learning styles. Nelson describes flexible curriculum adaptations catering to various student information processing and demonstration methods. This approach not only supports students with disabilities but also enriches the educational experience for all, promoting a more inclusive classroom environment.

The improvement of classroom resources, including adaptive technology, is crucial. Linda (2020) discusses effective strategies that span classroom to system-level inclusivity, such as differentiated instruction and collaborative teaching models, focusing on cultural and inclusive practices in early childhood settings. These strategies are essential for creating environments that support the participation of all children, enhancing their educational experiences.

Strengthening collaboration with families is crucial for creating customized educational plans (Cologon, 2022). Quinn (2016) emphasizes the vital role of parental involvement in personalized learning, which can address educational disparities effectively. He suggests that engaging parents more directly in the educational process allows schools to utilize parents' unique insights and resources regarding their children's learning preferences. This collaborative approach could significantly enhance the effectiveness of educational interventions and narrow achievement gaps.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) highlights the importance of partnerships among educators, families, and support professionals (DEEWR, 2009). The framework focuses on integrating daily routines and play into inclusive learning experiences that engage all children. Stakeholders develop individual inclusion plans using adaptive equipment and specialist skills. Such collaboration ensures optimal developmental outcomes and supports children with disabilities fully participating and achieving in all life areas, fostering belonging and achievement (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Dickinson et al., 2023).

Increasing awareness and understanding of disabilities within the community promotes a culture of inclusivity. Geens and Vandenbroeck (2013) demonstrate the multifaceted role of early childhood education and care centers as community hubs in urban settings, providing social support and promoting community integration. These centers are pivotal in fostering social cohesion and supporting the broader well-being of families from diverse backgrounds. Emphasizing community integration through educational settings can lead to a more inclusive society where the needs and potentials of all individuals are recognized and nurtured (Graham, 2019; Hoffnung, 2022).

The purpose of this article is to:

1. To examine barriers to inclusive education in early childhood settings.
2. To evaluate existing frameworks and pedagogical practices supporting inclusive education.
3. To propose strategies for advancing inclusivity through teacher training, curriculum innovation, family collaboration, and policy reform.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a narrative literature review and policy analysis approach. Sources include: National and international policy frameworks (e.g., DSE 2005, EYLF, NQF). Peer-reviewed studies on inclusive pedagogy (2011–2023). Survey data from Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA, 2023).

Conclusion

Inclusive education in early childhood settings is a noble ideal and a critical necessity that requires effective and persistent action. The literature reviewed underscores the profound impact of inclusivity on the development of children with disabilities, enhancing their educational outcomes and fostering essential social integration. It is evident that while the theoretical frameworks and legal protections such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 exist to support inclusion, the practical application within schools often remains lacking (Department of Education, 2005; De Bruin et al., 2023). These findings highlight the urgent need for ongoing teacher training,

curriculum development, and school culture reforms to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, are genuinely welcomed and supported.

Furthermore, the necessity for active and sustained advocacy by educators, families, and communities cannot be overstated. Advocacy is essential to drive the systemic changes needed to overcome persistent barriers such as cultural biases, insufficient resources, and a lack of comprehensive support from educational institutions (Churchill, 2021; Chainey, 2023). Strengthening partnerships between educators, families, and community resources, as emphasized by the Early Years Learning Framework, is vital in creating environments that nurture the potential of every child through personalized and respectful inclusion (DEEWR, 2009).

To advance towards a genuinely inclusive educational landscape, it is essential to prioritize integrating innovative teaching methods, such as those proposed by Universal Design for Learning, and to enhance the availability of adaptive technologies that cater to diverse learning needs (Nelson, 2013; Linda, 2020). These efforts should be complemented by a stronger focus on early interventions and the recognition of the unique contributions that children with disabilities bring to the learning environment. Additionally, the path to inclusive education is a continuous journey that demands commitment, innovation, and a deep understanding of the diverse needs of all learners. Through such dedicated efforts, it is hoped to see a future where every child can thrive in an educational setting that respects and enhances their unique abilities and potential. By embracing these challenges and opportunities, early childhood education settings can lead the way in building a more equitable and inclusive society.

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