



Thematic Report

# Promoting quality inclusion in early childhood care and education

Inclusive practices for each and every child

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## Abstract

The quality of early childhood services relies on the knowledge, expertise and skills of early childhood leaders and practitioners. However, despite this shared recognition, the shortage of a well-prepared workforce across many countries is a major barrier to ensuring quality inclusion. This challenging reality indicates that preparing and supporting a high-quality workforce to promote inclusive experiences for all young children is still a priority.

The aim of this paper is to provide a synthesis of inclusive practices that can be used in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings to promote equitable and inclusive learning experiences for all children. The practices are described within five areas: Learning Environments; Instructional Practices; Relationships and Supportive Interactions; Partnerships with Families; and Professional Collaboration. These practices, strongly supported by research evidence, are essential for achieving key goals of inclusion, such as development and learning; a sense of belonging and membership; and development of social interactions and friendships for all children. This paper will describe the practices that can be used in ECCE settings to support children's inclusive learning experiences, and the benefits of using such practices for children, families, and early childhood practitioners. Additionally, this paper will consider the conditions that need to be in place for ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive practices.

The field of implementation science has provided some useful research-based frameworks for understanding the drivers that support the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of evidence-based practices in early childhood. Using an implementation science framework, this paper will consider the drivers for supporting the implementation of inclusive practices in ECCE settings. Examples include building the capacity of the early childhood workforce to apply inclusive practices effectively across various learning environments; supporting leaders and leadership implementation teams in building an inclusive culture within ECCE environments and promoting continuous quality improvement through assessment systems that monitor the application of inclusive practices.

Developing a shared understanding around high-quality inclusive practices and the drivers that support implementation can be an important step towards building consensus around a transnational professional development framework to support the application of quality inclusive practices in ECCE settings. This paper draws from international research evidence on quality inclusive practices at the early childhood level that are essential for ensuring quality inclusive experiences for all children and their families and will consider policy implications for building quality inclusion for all.

# Table of contents

<a href="#">Abstract</a> .....	2
<a href="#">Table of contents</a> .....	3
<a href="#">Introduction</a> .....	4
<a href="#">Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education</a> .....	5
<a href="#">Inclusive practices</a> .....	6
<a href="#">Learning environments</a> .....	6
<a href="#">Instructional practices</a> .....	7
<a href="#">Relationships and supportive interactions</a> .....	7
<a href="#">Partnerships with families</a> .....	7
<a href="#">Professional collaboration</a> .....	8
<a href="#">Conditions for successful implementation of inclusive practices</a> .....	8
<a href="#">Professional development and training</a> .....	9
<a href="#">Leadership</a> .....	9
<a href="#">Implications for policy and practice</a> .....	10
<a href="#">References</a> .....	12

## Introduction

Inclusive early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings are contexts in which young children with diverse learning profiles and characteristics participate and learn together. It is well established that high-quality early services and practices in inclusive settings are beneficial for children, families, early childhood practitioners and communities (e.g. Gardner et al., 2019; Guralnick, 2001; Odom et al., 2011; Strain & Bovey, 2011; Weiland, 2016; Viskovic, 2021). Indeed, in addition to fostering developmental gains for all children, inclusive ECCE settings enable the development of attitudes of respect and openness to diversity that will have lifelong positive impacts for all.

The importance of the early years, and the conditions that need to be in place for every child to develop fully, are highlighted in the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) for Early Childhood Development launched by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the World Bank (2018). This widely agreed upon framework recognizes that the optimal environment is one that allows for the care of the child in conditions that promote good health, adequate nutrition, early learning opportunities, responsive care, and safety and security. Inclusive environments help ensure these conditions by providing opportunities for diverse participation and social interaction.

It is important to recall that education is a right recognized by international conventions and documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination (UNESCO, 1960), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). One of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG4, calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning opportunities (United Nations, 2015). For young children, Target 4.2 of this goal recommends that, by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood care and development and to pre-school education that prepares them for primary education.

Recently, in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood and the need to scale up actions to achieve the targeted goals, UNESCO and its partners have developed the Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood (GPS). The GPS reaffirms the importance of 'leaving no child behind'. Key strategies were developed in the following five areas: (1) evidence for action and rights; (2) data, monitoring and evaluation for accountability; (3) expanding access, inclusion, equity and quality; (4) strengthening policy, governance, financing and advocacy; (5) international and national coordination and cooperation (UNESCO, 2022).

Despite a shared recognition within the field of ECCE that the quality of early childhood services relies on the knowledge, expertise and skills of early childhood practitioners to meet children's diverse learning needs, the shortage of a well-prepared workforce is a major barrier to ensuring quality inclusion in early childhood (Henry & Namhla, 2020; US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education, 2015; Rouse, 2017; World Teachers' Day, 2019). This challenging reality indicates that preparing and supporting a high-quality workforce to promote quality inclusive experiences for all young children is still a priority (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Snyder et al., 2012; Table, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to provide a synthesis of research-based inclusive practices that can be used in ECCE settings to promote equitable and inclusive learning experiences for all children. An additional aim is to consider key drivers that support the implementation of inclusive practices.

### Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education

While early childhood inclusion is still inconsistently defined and understood, more recent conceptualizations focus on three key dimensions. First, recent definitions focus on the goals of inclusion for all children and their families, including participation; development and learning; a sense of belonging and membership; and development of social interactions and friendships for all children (Barton & Smith, 2015a; DEC/NAEYC, 2009; Guralnick & Bruder, 2016; Koller et al., 2018; Odom et al., 2011; Simplican et al., 2015; Zoniou-Sideri & Nteropoulou-Nterou, 2012). Second, recent conceptualizations recognize that the *practices* that early childhood practitioners implement are essential to high-quality inclusion. The current focus on the practices in ECCE settings suggests that rather than an issue of placement, successful inclusion relies on the quality of day-to-day practices experienced by children in their engagements with learning activities and social interactions with various adults and peers (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). A third dimension of quality inclusion to be shared across recent conceptualizations is the provision of equitable learning opportunities for all children (NAEYC, 2019; Shaeffer, 2019; Unterhalter, 2019; Zoniou-Sideri & Nteropoulou-Nterou, 2012). Inclusive ECCE environments equitably distribute learning opportunities by ensuring all children experience responsive interactions that: nurture their full range of social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and linguistic abilities; reflect and model fundamental principles of fairness and justice; and help them accomplish the goals of anti-bias education (NAEYC, 2019).

Through quality inclusive practices, early childhood practitioners demonstrate that they value diversity and children's strengths and work to ensure that all children have equitable access to learning given their differences in culture, family structure, language, gender, abilities and disabilities, religious beliefs, or economic class (NAEYC, 2019). Therefore, in this paper, 'inclusive practices' are conceptualized as promoting children's active participation in their ECCE environments while, at the same time, supporting children's diverse learning needs through individualized accommodations and instructional strategies and supports (Soukakou, 2016). According to this premise, high-quality inclusive ECCE practices are equitable practices for each and every child (Brooks et al., 2022).

## Inclusive practices

A strong research base supports the benefits of inclusion for children with and without disabilities. Research has shown that effective, evidence-based instructional strategies for children with disabilities can be implemented successfully in inclusive early childhood settings (Grisham-Brown et al., 2009; Strain & Bovey, 2011). All children, including those with the most significant disabilities and the highest learning needs, can make significant developmental and learning progress in inclusive settings. Studies have also shown that for children without disabilities, the benefits of inclusive experiences include positive academic, social, and personal outcomes. Young children who participate and learn together with children presenting with diverse learning profiles, can demonstrate greater compassion and empathy and develop a better understanding of diversity and disability as concepts when peer interactions are adequately supported by classroom teachers (Cross et al., 2004; Diamond & Huang, 2005). Studies have also shown that when practitioners target their services, interventions, and practices to support children’s individualized learning needs, all children can benefit, because they learn best through individualized learning experiences. Children in high-quality inclusive early childhood settings also benefit from developmental specialists who can recognize and support their diverse learning profiles in supportive ways (US Department of Health and Human Services, & US Department of Education, 2015).

Early childhood practitioners have a unique opportunity to directly support child development and family well-being through inclusive practices that nurture children’s diverse learning needs and family priorities. Over the past 20 years, strong research evidence has been accumulated on the effectiveness of inclusive practices (Barton & Smith, 2015b; Odom et al., 2011; Guralnick & Bruder, 2016; DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

In this section, we present five areas of inclusive practices with research support that can be used in ECCE settings to underpin the diverse learning needs of young children: Learning Environments; Instructional Practices; Relationships and Supportive Interactions; Partnerships with Families; and Professional Collaboration. These areas are described in relation to what they involve and how they might be used in ECCE settings by a wide range of practitioners.

### *Learning environments*

The quality environments in which young children participate with their peers are of critical importance for their development and learning. Early learning environments have often been considered an additional teacher, facilitating the development of a wide range of skills across all key areas of child development, including physical, cognitive, personal, and social-emotional development. Inclusive environments can be considered as not only the physical spaces that are used by children, but also all the materials and equipment that might be used by adults and children. Inclusive ECCE environments promote accessibility of the physical space, materials, and equipment; reflect diverse learning profiles; and are intentionally organized and arranged by practitioners to support children’s individualized learning needs and social experiences (Hardy et al., 2021). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been put forward as an effective evidence-based framework for designing environments that can be accessible to all children providing equitable opportunities to actively engage with materials and participate in learning activities and routines (Conn-Powers et al., 2006).

### *Instructional practices*

International research has indicated that specialized instruction, interventions, and supports are key components of high-quality inclusion and has identified a wide range of effective instructional practices (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008; Odom et al., 2011; DEC, 2014; Sandall et al., 2005). Examples of specialized instructional practices used in inclusive settings to support children's participation and learning include naturalistic instructional approaches such as embedded instruction (Horn & Banerjee, 2009), activity-based intervention (Johnson et al., 2015; Özen & Ergenekon, 2011), universal design for learning (Katz & Sokal, 2016), and peer-mediated intervention (Robertson et al., 2003). There has also been growing research support for tiered models of intervention in ECCE settings. Tiered approaches to intervention focus on supporting early childhood practitioners to gather information on children's learning, implement instructional practices, and target specific instructional strategies and interventions to support children's individual learning needs across various areas of development (Odom et al., 2011). Such models of intervention involve implementing high-quality, evidence-based curricula for all children (Tier 1); providing small-group interventions and instruction for those children who need more support (Tier 2); and applying individualized interventions and supports for those children with the highest level of need (Tier 3) (Hemmeter et al., 2016; Prasse et al., 2012). Response to intervention (Buysse & Peisner-Feinberg, 2010), the Pyramid Model (Hemmeter et al., 2016), and Building Blocks (Sandall et al., 2019) are some examples of tiered models of intervention.

### *Relationships and supportive interactions*

Nurturing and responsive relationships are vital for healthy child development and learning. Connecting with young children through responsive interactions is essential for supporting their development. Responsive interactions build on children's interests and respond predictably to their needs. They include listening, observing children and engaging in reciprocal interactions about things that matter to them (Artman-Meeker et al., 2021). In inclusive ECCE settings, practitioners support children's social-emotional development and learning through developmentally appropriate activities and routines, as well as through daily responsive conversations and engagements. A key goal for all children in high-quality early learning environments is the development of social skills and meaningful relationships and friendships with their peers. In high-quality inclusive environments, practitioners create a classroom culture that nurtures and supports the development of meaningful peer interactions through the use of daily planned social activities and routines, the facilitation of social play, as well as through the use of a wide range of research-based instructional supports, such as the use of social stories and supportive strategies (Scattone et al., 2006; Wahman et al., 2022), and the use of peer-mediated support strategies and interventions (DEC, 2014; Soukakou, 2016).

### *Partnerships with families*

The importance of family participation and involvement has been highlighted by related research and policy documents over the past several decades (e.g. Dunst et al., 2007; DEC, 2014; Guralnick, 2020; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; European Commission, 2014). Family involvement, engagement and participation is essential for achieving positive developmental and learning outcomes for all children. Exchanging information with families to support their decision-making enhances their capacity to meet children's needs (Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016). Recognition of the importance of family involvement in supporting a child's development is a prerequisite for this change. Families should be actively involved in all processes related to the assessment of their children's strengths and needs, intervention planning, implementation, and progress monitoring (Bricker et al., 2021). Active family involvement can be promoted and enabled through the use of

appropriate curricula and materials that reflect family diversity and which are respectful of families' environments, resources, routines, and cultures. Close collaboration between early childhood practitioners and families is essential for supporting all children's inclusive experiences. Family-centred practices involve relating to families with dignity and respect (Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016), using bi-directional communication strategies, recognizing each family and their children as unique, and joint planning for gathering and exchanging information (Wood & Liderman, 2008).

### *Professional collaboration*

Meeting the diversity of children's needs requires the involvement of a wide range of professionals and practitioners (Flottman et al., 2011). Effective professional collaboration can be beneficial both for children and early years practitioners (Anderson & Lindeman, 2017; Hong & Shaffer, 2015; Weglarz-Ward et al., 2020). Paquet et al., (2022) highlighted the importance of communicating in ways that support collaboration (Hart Barenett & O'Shaughnessy, 2015; Flottman et al., 2011), recognizing and sharing responsibilities for inclusion (Mogharreban & Bruns, 2009), providing leadership for collaboration (Bricker et al., 2020; Flottman et al., 2011; Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019), and jointly planning interventions (Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019). Indeed, communication needs to promote information and knowledge-sharing among the various professionals involved, including families. Furthermore, concentrated efforts are needed to plan the objectives and the means to meet children's needs and to achieve them based on the perspective of shared responsibility for actions and results. Additional characteristics of effective collaboration that have been indicated across research include practices such as joint participation in planning, shared philosophies, defined professional roles, stability of relationships, and administrative support (Bricker et al., 2022; Bruder et al., 2019; Odom et al., 2011). Additionally, there is a need for clear accountability in multi-professional collaboration to enable the adoption of common processes across early years settings, which are coordinated and built around meeting all children's needs.

### Conditions for successful implementation of inclusive practices

The field of implementation science has provided some useful frameworks for understanding the conditions that support the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of evidence-based practices in early childhood (Fixsen et al., 2005; 2013; Powel et al., 2015). The successful application of effective practices requires the integration of specific systemic supports. Using an implementation science framework, this paper considers the drivers for supporting the implementation of inclusive practices in ECCE settings. Examples include building the capacity of early childhood practitioners to apply inclusive practices effectively across various learning environments; supporting leaders and leadership implementation teams in building an inclusive culture within ECCE environments and promoting continuous quality improvement through assessment systems that monitor the application of inclusive practices (Fixsen & Blase, 2016).

Developing a shared understanding around high-quality inclusive practices and the drivers that support implementation can be an important step towards building a framework for supporting the implementation of quality inclusive practices in ECCE settings. For the fields of early childhood and special education, the work of the National Implementation Research Network in the USA has been key in establishing an understanding of factors influencing the effective implementation of innovative programmes and interventions (Fixsen et al., 2005) and what contributes to achieving desired outcomes for young children and their families. This paper focuses on two drivers that influence the quality of implementation of inclusive practices in ECCE settings: professional development and training; and leadership.



### *Professional development and training*

Professional development and training are identified as key competency drivers for building the knowledge and capacity of early childhood practitioners to apply inclusive practices effectively. Professional development (PD) has been defined as 'facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of professional knowledge, skills and dispositions as well as the application of this knowledge in practice' (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008, p. 3). The importance of initial training and continuing professional development for inclusion has been extensively documented across the early childhood research field (Snyder et al., 2011; Snyder et al., 2012). Research has indicated that early childhood practitioners often report that they are not adequately prepared to support children with diverse learning needs in ECCE settings (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). Thus, initial training must be geared toward providing opportunities for early childhood practitioners to generate and apply new knowledge around inclusive practices from the start of professional preparation (Mitter & Putcha, 2018). For this purpose, effective professional development provides opportunities for practitioners to engage with children's experiences in inclusive settings and apply a range of possible solutions to the challenges encountered in supporting children.

A number of rigorous research reviews of in-service, professional development approaches for teachers have identified components that might result in effectively enhancing teachers' knowledge and practice skills (Dunst et al., 2015; Winton et al., 2016). These components include: 1) A focus on practices that are explicitly defined and observable to support fidelity of implementation in educational settings; 2) Job-embedded opportunities for teachers to reflect, implement new practices and receive explicit feedback, such as coaching (Dunst et al., 2015); 3) Provision of information linking improvements of environmental quality or teachers' interactional and instructional practices to student learning outcomes; and 4) Sufficient intensity and duration of the professional development programme to achieve the intended results (Winton et al., 2016).

### *Leadership*

Leadership is a strong driver to support changes and promote quality inclusion in early years settings. Leadership has been found to be a determining factor in supporting the implementation of effective inclusive instructional practices (Rous, 2004). Leadership must be present at different levels of influence (national, regional, and local) (UNESCO, 2021; Bipath et al., 2021). The adoption of national policies that promote diversity and inclusive values supports the implementation of inclusive practices (Ring et al., 2019). These policies define the conditions for ECCE programmes and settings to achieve inclusion by specifying, among other things, the expected roles of facility staff and management. For early childhood settings, these policies help develop a common and shared vision of inclusion in their organization by specifying the educational practices to be implemented, as well as the partnerships and mechanisms for collaboration. In concrete terms, effective leadership can be translated into the time and support provided to practitioners for collaborating with each other and with families. The commitment of early childhood practitioners to adopt inclusive practices contributes to the successful implementation of inclusion. It is well documented that, at the local level, early childhood practitioners are better prepared to implement quality inclusion practices when they are effectively supported by their administration and leadership (Lieber et al., 1997).

## Implications for policy and practice

Successful inclusion depends on a combination of multisectoral and intersectoral actions made by policy-makers, practitioners, and families. When considering the conditions that support effective implementation, some implementation drivers are well studied and understood while others are still to be examined. Among the key drivers put forward by related research evidence-base and policy is personnel preparation.

With regard to initial training, an important goal involves delineating the knowledge and skills that early childhood practitioners need to develop in order to support children's diverse needs, as well as considering how to acquire them. By reaching consensus on the competencies and practices that practitioners need to implement to support quality inclusion across ECCE settings, different countries pave the way for building a better prepared early childhood workforce. Towards this goal, countries will benefit from developing a comprehensive, coordinated early childhood professional development (PD) system that will support early childhood practitioners in implementing inclusive practices. Within a coordinated system, local and national personnel standards and competencies of the early childhood workforce are aligned with recommended inclusive practices to ensure the most successful outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). Developing a shared knowledge and competency base across levels of professional preparation, including pre-service and in-service personnel preparation, across personnel standards and practices, and across the range of child-serving providers, is essential for ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive practices. Moreover, an effective, integrated PD system is based on coordination of the various disciplines and sectors responsible for preparing and supporting the range of practitioners implementing inclusive services and practices in ECCE settings. Participation and collaboration between all professionals who support inclusive practices in ECCE settings (early childhood practitioners, inclusion specialists, professional development providers, setting administrators, and families), is essential for ensuring successful implementation of quality inclusive services and practices.

While initial education and continuous professional development are essential components of quality inclusion, they are not sufficient for ensuring that inclusive practices are implemented effectively. In line with implementation science, it is important to develop a monitoring assessment system to evaluate the quality of inclusive practices that are being implemented across ECCE settings and use procedures for supporting continuous quality improvement efforts. An effective quality assessment and improvement framework for inclusion in early childhood includes a system for gathering data on the quality of practices that are being implemented in inclusive ECCE settings, as well as a system for monitoring the impact of quality improvement efforts (e.g. professional learning programmes) on the practices that are being used in ECCE settings.

Another key determining factor for supporting the implementation of inclusion in early childhood is the development of effective teaming and collaboration practices through strong partnerships with families and early childhood professionals. Strong partnerships with families that involve family-centred practices enable early years practitioners to plan more effectively all aspects of children's personalized learning and help them engage with families in supporting their children's development across different learning environments.

Effective multi-professional collaboration is also of crucial importance for supporting the implementation of quality inclusion in ECCE. Toward this goal, it is imperative that multi-agency professional collaboration moves beyond information sharing to coordinated integrated activities that promote continuity and consistency of levels of service provision across ECCE settings.

Creating inclusive and equitable learning experiences for all children in ECCE settings and their communities is a key goal for international efforts aimed at ensuring high quality education and learning opportunities for all young children. As we centre our efforts toward expanding access to high-quality early childhood education for all, it is critical that inclusion becomes a defining feature of quality early childhood education. The vision presented in this paper, that all children require inclusive and equitable practices and experiences in ECCE settings and communities, requires effective models of professional preparation and ongoing professional development. It also requires committed local and national leadership; a shared commitment and collaboration between local authorities; and strong partnerships with families, ECCE settings, local communities, and government at all levels. Toward this goal, policies at all levels must be adopted and aligned with research-based inclusive practices. Clear positioning at the national and regional levels is necessary, as well as in the early childhood education community. A guarantee of the sustainability of these policies lies in the involvement of the relevant actors from the beginning of their development. These policies must also be intersectoral and part of a social project of equity, recognizing that diversity is an opportunity for quality education for all.

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