



Inclusion in early childhood care and education

Brief on inclusion in education

Inclusion in education must start in the early years when the foundation for lifelong learning is built and fundamental values and attitudes are formed. Inequality in learning and development emerges during early childhood, before children begin primary school. Beginning to address inclusion when children begin primary school is simply too late.



Introduction

Inclusion in quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) is characterised as comprehensive, multisectoral, integrated, child-centered and play-based, and ensures that all children and their families are involved in the process. Provided at home, at school, or in a centre, inclusive ECCE programmes attend to children's developmental needs holistically by offering adequate nutrition, health care, consistent nurturing, protection, psycho-social support, and opportunities for early learning and social stimulation. Inclusive ECCE programmes promote values, attitudes and behaviours, such as equality, social justice, respect for all and celebrate diversity and differences. They also address specific cultural contexts, and are complemented by inclusion in higher levels of education and lifelong learning opportunities.

Inclusion in quality ECCE is especially important for children from disadvantaged families. It can be promoted through setting an overall vision of inclusion in the education system starting with early childhood, making ECCE a government priority, providing parenting programmes and early childhood intervention (ECI) programmes for children at risk, encouraging inclusive pedagogical approaches through teacher training, and forging multi-sectoral collaboration.



Importance of inclusion in ECCE

To be most effective, inclusion in education must begin in early childhood. Inequalities in learning and other child development outcomes emerge before primary schooling (WHO, 2007). It is therefore more effective to tackle educational inequalities at their roots, by acting as early as possible. Evidence shows that inclusion in quality ECCE helps compensate for disadvantage at home and enable disadvantaged children to have an equally strong start in life as their more advantaged peers (World Bank, 2010). Furthermore, early childhood is a formative period, where basic values and attitudes – toward others and about society – are formed (UNESCO, 2006). In this respect, ECCE has an important role to play in nurturing young children in values and attitudes that favour inclusion, equality, social justice, empathy, respect for others and living together.

ECCE programmes are most beneficial when they attend to children’s developmental needs in a holistic manner. Young children learn best and develop their full potential when their holistic needs are met, and they are supported by caring adults, who understand child development and have strategies for supporting it in familiar settings.

By enhancing educational achievement and reducing repetition, drop-out and failure, ECCE contributes to making education systems more effective and efficient which increases the well-being, resilience and productivity of future adults. This is strongly facilitated by delivering teaching and learning that enables all learners to participate fully in the learning process. It aims to support the development of children’s personalities, to achieve their full potential, and prepare them for active citizenship.

Expanding access to quality ECCE programmes and ensuring that they are inclusive must therefore be a major priority of any government. To do so, providing integrated services, through multi-sectoral coordination, is key. This can be achieved by education ministries working collaboratively with teachers, school administrators, curriculum and professional standards, learning materials and environments; health ministries for screening, assessment and rehabilitation services; and social welfare ministries for financial aid.

Inclusion in ECCE:

- Is accessible and affordable for all, and promotes equal opportunities for children to attend, learn, develop and participate in learning and social activities;
- Provides for children’s holistic development, ensuring the quality and physical accessibility of ECCE facilities;
- Ensures transitions from mostly home-based ECI provision to inclusive ECCE, and supports continuous monitoring and assessment of children’s development and learning;
- Respects and celebrates diversity and differences; all children are valued equally – it does not exclude, stereotype, stigmatize or discriminate against any children on the basis of their differences;
- Views diversity, not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity for learning and promoting understanding;
- Embraces culturally-relevant practices and knowledge of participating families, and supports children’s mother tongue;
- Protects children from abuse, neglect, and stress by providing consistent nurturing care and protection; and
- Creates strong linkages with families and communities as partners in child development and learning, and is attentive to their backgrounds, needs and situations.



Challenges

Despite progress over the past decade in expanding access, the gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education was 61.5% as of 2019 (UIS database). Children from disadvantaged families – who stand to benefit most from these programmes – are most likely to be excluded from them.

Factors that affect children's inclusion in ECCE can be as follows:

- Poverty represents the most frequent factor of exclusion: children from the wealthiest families are seven times more likely to attend pre-primary education programmes than children from the poorest families.¹
- Place of residence is also a prevalent exclusionary factor: children living in urban areas are 2.5 times more likely to attend pre-primary education than those living in rural areas. Even when rural children attend ECCE services, they are often taken care of by untrained personnel in inadequate facilities.
- In the countries affected by emergencies and crises, the average gross enrolment rate in pre-primary education is only 31%. Around 82 million pre-primary-aged children – or about one third of those enrolled worldwide – live in emergency affected countries and experience instability and toxic stress.²
- The level of parental education, ethnicity, language and disability status can add to children's lower participation rates in ECCE.³ Children of mothers with secondary education and above are five times more likely to attend pre-primary education programmes compared to children of mothers with primary education and below.⁴ In 49 countries with available data, children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than their non-disabled peers.⁵ Parents may struggle to find an ECCE service that welcomes children with disabilities, while some may choose not to send their children with disabilities due to concerns about their safety. Across Europe, young Roma children participate in ECCE services at half the rate of majority populations.⁶
- There is high disparity between lower- and higher-income countries in relation to the range of early childhood intervention support offered to optimize child development and to prevent and manage developmental risks and difficulties.⁷
- Even when ECCE programmes are accessible, their learning environments may not be inclusive of children's various backgrounds, abilities, gender, cultures, languages and interests. Children whose mother tongue is not the language of instruction of the ECCE settings, may find it difficult to participate in teaching and learning activities, and are at a greater risk of dropout.⁸ Young immigrant children may experience discrimination in their interactions with peers and adults, such as receiving negative comments on their personal appearances and that of their parents, and the absence of diversified representations in learning materials (e.g. in play and reading materials). Receiving negative messages from preschools, can lead to lowering the likelihood of academic success and economic mobility⁹ and can have a defining impact on children's self-esteem, confidence, participation and feelings of acceptance.
- Teachers lack opportunities for relevant, in-service training and mentoring needed to help them respond to children's diverse needs and interests in an inclusive manner.
- In some countries, children belonging to excluded and marginalized groups are segregated and placed in special groups or separate ECCE settings.¹⁰



Policy recommendations

To achieve the goal of genuine inclusion in ECCE for all children and to overcome the shortcomings discussed above, what is ultimately required is transformation of the ECCE subsector and all levels of education which follow, as well as raising awareness and support for inclusion across communities and cultures.

The following key recommendations describe what governments must do to implement this transformational agenda:

- ▶ Accept the increasingly agreed-upon conceptualization of early childhood as beginning with conception and continuing through a successful transition, from the home or early intervention and parenting programs and pre-primary programs, into the early grades of primary school.
- ▶ Reinforce support for the relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG4 on education and, specifically target 4.2 on universal ECCE, and SDG 10 which focuses on reducing inequality within and among countries.
- ▶ Ratify and implement the relevant conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol.
- ▶ Develop mechanisms to systematically identify and map groups/regions where children are most frequently excluded from ECI and ECCE programmes, and analyse and address the causes of their exclusion.
- ▶ Foster cooperation and partnerships among all stakeholders concerned with ECCE - including those working in the education, health, social welfare, nutrition and water and hygiene sectors – to develop and implement early childhood care and education laws, policies, structures, budgets, and strategies which lead to more inclusive ECCE programmes and practices.
- ▶ Increase investment in ECI and ECCE, first through government ministries, but also by establishing partnerships with other ECCE stakeholders, and through innovative financing mechanisms.
- ▶ Expand the provision of ECCE programmes – public, private, and community-based – toward achieving SDG 4.2 by 2030, by ensuring that ECI and ECCE programmes are affordable and fully accessible, especially for disadvantaged groups. Work toward a universally available mainstream provision that offers specialized services to effectively meet the needs of the most disadvantaged, excluded children.
- ▶ Design national ECCE curriculum and associated learning materials and assessment systems to respond effectively to all learners by being oriented toward inclusion.
- ▶ Establish Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) policies, strategies and laws to identify and then provide programmes for young children at risk of developmental delays and those with identified developmental delays and disabilities.
- ▶ Develop inclusive teaching-learning strategies and practices and ensure that they are suitable to all, especially to those most excluded from ECI and ECCE programmes and schools.
- ▶ Enhance the quality of pre- and in-service teacher education (for ECI and ECCE and the early primary grades) by including concepts, methods, and skills oriented both toward inclusion and toward multisectoral collaboration and planned transitions between ECI, ECCE programmes and primary schools.
- ▶ Provide subsidies to families and ECCE services to permit the participation of children from impoverished families.
- ▶ Develop mother tongue-based language policies, accompanied by linguistically and culturally relevant materials, books, teaching and facilitation practices.
- ▶ Develop models of inclusive, accessible, and affordable ECCE programmes appropriate for rural and remote regions, conflict-affected and/or emergency situations, and children of ethnic minorities, migrant and refugee families.
- ▶ Conduct analyses of gender biases in ECCE programmes and the development of activities to mitigate them.



Conclusion

Experiences around the world show that it is necessary to respond to the specific needs of each excluded child, who may experience challenges arising from a combination of factors of exclusion, such as gender, poverty, place of residence, ethnicity, language, legal status, and development delay and disability. Responses should be framed within a broad framework of inclusion for all that rejects marginalization, discrimination, segregation

and labelling. The overall focus should be on establishing inclusive ECCE policies, strategies, and practices that aim to remove barriers, promote optimal development and learning for all, increase participation and inclusion, and thereby enable relevant ministries to become fully inclusive, both in vision and in practices. Only then can we really achieve the goal of good quality education for all.

Further reading

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Endnotes

- 1 UNICEF, 2019. *A World Ready to Learn: prioritizing quality early childhood education*. <https://www.unicef.org/media/57926/file/A-world-ready-to-learn-advocacy-brief-2019.pdf>
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- 4 UNICEF, 2019. *A World Ready to Learn: prioritizing quality early childhood education*. <https://www.unicef.org/media/57926/file/A-world-ready-to-learn-advocacy-brief-2019.pdf>
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- 8 Ball, 2014. *Children learn better in their mother tongue*. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/children-learn-better-their-mother-tongue>
- 9 Adair, 2015. *The impact of discrimination on the early schooling experiences of children from immigrant families*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/impact-discrimination-early-schooling-experiences-children-immigrant-families>
- 10 European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017. *Inclusive early childhood education. A literature review*. <https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/IECE%20Literature%20Review.pdf>

The **UNESCO Briefs on Inclusion in Education** is a series of short notes that seek to answer various questions that policy-makers and key stakeholders have about the planning and implementation of inclusive education policies and practices. The Briefs are a follow-up to the UNESCO International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education held in Cali, Colombia in September 2019.

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The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



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