



Research Snapshot No.15

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How is inclusion defined at the early childhood level in China, Germany, and the UK? A systematic literature review. Tan, R., Devarakonda, C., & Rothe. A.

What you need to know

The study was published in 2024 by a group of researchers interested in promoting inclusive education. They observed that the concept of inclusion in education is both a global concern and being differently interpreted within and across countries. The lack of clarity leads to confusion in terms of both how to operationalize the concept and how to study it in a consistent way. The research question was: How is inclusion in the early childhood context in China, Germany and the UK defined? Inclusion across the three countries is considered using the four dimensions of access, acceptance, participation and achievement' identified by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) and Artiles and Kozleski (2016).

What is this research about?

The study examined how early childhood inclusion is defined in China, Germany and the UK. In the first instance, it examines how the word inclusion is interpreted and translated in China, Germany and the four countries in the UK, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Different interpretations emerge as the result of different social histories which impact on how social cohesion is perceived. To compare the experiences of inclusion in the different countries, the researchers started with a framework for inclusion that includes the elements of access, acceptance, participation and achievement. This was then investigated through a systematic review of relevant studies from the three countries. A comparison was developed of how different countries were progressing in implementing the elements. In conclusion the researchers identify similarities and differences between the countries, discuss the tokenism that occurs when preconceptions about who should benefit from inclusion limits who benefits, and argue for a principled approach.

What did the researchers do?

The research methodology involved a systematic review using electronic databases to search for literature published between 2000 and 2020. The initial search employed primary keywords such as *inclusion, early childhood settings, kindergartens, early childcare, childcare diversity, difference, access, acceptance, participation, and achievement*, focusing on studies from China, Germany, and the UK.

Articles were selected based on the following criteria: they reported an empirical study, discussed the concept of inclusion, and specifically addressed early childhood education in China, Germany, or the UK.

In the second stage, articles were excluded if they were not published in peer-reviewed journals or did not examine perceptions or definitions of inclusion. The final selection comprised five articles from China, four from Germany, and six from the UK.

The full texts of these articles were independently coded by three researchers to identify data relevant to the research questions, including the study's aims, methodology, key findings, and dimensions of inclusion. The researchers then conducted six Zoom sessions to review all codes and ensure consistency in descriptions across coders.

Outcome data on various dimensions of inclusion were extracted, and commonalities were identified based on key passages within each article. These were then summarized into overarching thematic categories in alignment with the four dimensions of the guiding framework.

What did the researchers find?

The findings did not necessarily relate to all the countries.

- **Access Dimension:** Studies categorized children's perspectives into four areas: physical access, access to activities within program design, access to curriculum and assessment, and access to qualified professionals. A lack of access to activities and program structures was widely reported. Children's limited access to curriculum and assessment was identified in China and the UK, while a lack of access to qualified professionals was noted in the UK.
- **Acceptance Dimension:** The articles indicated that children with special education needs, as well as those from immigrant backgrounds, along with their parents, were not fully accepted in early childhood settings. In some settings, children with disabilities were more readily accepted than children from immigrant backgrounds due to factors such as physical appearance and mother language differences.

Children were accepted for inclusion based on specific needs, such as speech development and the severity of their condition. Discussions on acceptance centred on questions like, "Who is eligible for inclusion?" and "Who does inclusion apply to?"

These questions underscored the tensions in linking inclusion to the severity of a child's disability.

- **Participation Dimension:** The reviewed literature from China and Germany emphasized a lack of children's participation in classroom activities, instruction, and games. Additionally, while parental involvement was deemed important, there was a noticeable lack of parental engagement in decision-making processes and in children's social lives.
- **Achievement Dimension:** Studies from China and the UK focused primarily on children's academic achievement, with less emphasis on their social and emotional development.

Conclusions: Studies tended to focus on narrow definitions of inclusion, emphasizing individual deficiencies rather than broader contextual factors. Inclusion was often framed around disabilities, with certain preconditions required for participation.

The authors advocate for a more principle-based approach, rooted in inclusive values such as equity, participation, community, and respect. They suggest that the four dimensions—access, acceptance, participation, and achievement—provide a comprehensive, multi-layered framework for understanding the complexity of inclusion.

How can you use this research?

How is inclusion defined at the early childhood level in China, Germany, and the UK is an insightful and valuable article for anyone trying to understand the dimensions of inclusion or its experiences across different countries or cultures. Most countries had a common starting point in the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention provides a vision that can be interpreted in a multitude of ways.

The four dimensions of access, acceptance, participation and achievement identified in this research provide a valuable approach to identify what children are experiencing.

The four dimensions identified in the research also broaden out our understanding of inclusion. In Australia the conversation has mostly focused on the dimensions of access and participation. Acceptance and achievement add two important dimensions. These are elements that can be developed within each ECEC program.

The article also shines a light on Australia's experience. Australia does recognise the importance of a broad, principled understanding of inclusion. For example, the Commonwealth Inclusion Support Program identifies children with disabilities, First Nations children, and recent arrivals—including refugees—as groups requiring inclusion. However, as a recent report by the Productivity Commission identified, most resources go to children with disabilities to fund an untrained staff member. Access to professional staff was an issue identified in the research.

Where to from here?

Early Childhood Australia and Early Childhood Intervention Australia (n.d.) Position statement on the inclusion of children with a disability in early childhood education and care. https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ECA_Position_statement_Disability_Inclusion_web.pdf

Warren, J., Soukakou, E. P., Forster, J., Ng, L. T., & Nteropoulou-Nterou, E. (2021). Small steps: the inclusion of young children with disabilities in Australia, Greece, and Malaysia. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 45(2), 164-177.

Kemp, C. R. (2016). Early childhood inclusion in Australia. *Infants and Young Children*, 29(3), 178-187. <https://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.0000000000000062>

About the researchers

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Citation

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This Research Snapshot was prepared by John Forster, a PRECI committee member. John graduated with BA(Hons) and is the CEO of Noah's Ark Inc. He has been managing inclusive early childhood programs for the past 35 years.

In the spirit of reconciliation PRECI acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.