



Research Snapshot No. 21

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Teacher perspectives and approaches toward promoting inclusion in play-based learning for children with developmental disabilities.

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What you need to know

- Children with NDD tend to experience greater social isolation than typically developing (TD) children, including low rates of engagement in social play.
- Inclusion in play is important because play is a central context for social, emotional, and developmental growth during early childhood.
- Teachers' beliefs and practices matter: how they conceptualise inclusion can affect children's access to meaningful play, and thus their learning and development.

What is this research about?

This research explored how a group of kindergarten teachers conceptualised and supported the inclusion of children with NDD in play-based classrooms. The research was guided by the following questions:

- How do teachers conceptualise inclusion in the play-based kindergarten classroom?
- How do teachers view the role of play in the promotion of inclusion in kindergarten?
- How do kindergarten teachers support the inclusion of children with NDD in play?

What did the researchers do?

They conducted a qualitative study with teachers in eight play-based kindergarten classrooms in Ontario, Canada. The research involved observations and semi-structured interviews, which explored their views on:

- What inclusion looks like
- The role of play in inclusion
- How they support children with NDD
- Their beliefs about disability and teaching

Then, they compared teacher beliefs with observed practices to identify alignment or mismatch in how they supported children with NDD in play.

There were limitations to the scope of the research due to pandemic-related school closures, sampling procedures shifted. Consequently, not every classroom contained children with NDD. However, each teacher reported previous experience teaching children with NDD in kindergarten and spoke directly about those experiences.

What did the researchers find?

- Alongside environmental considerations, seven of eight teachers endorsed direct teacher involvement in children's play to support inclusion. Teachers discussed supporting positive social interactions among children, including "a lot of prompting and coaching."
- Six teachers held interventionist beliefs about disability and teaching: they saw the responsibility for supporting children's learning and social participation as lying with the teacher and the environment, not just the child.
- Perceived barriers to inclusion in play remain: children with NDD often preferred solitary or parallel play, which could limit peer interaction; some typically developing (TD) peers avoided playing with children with NDD; and certain play preferences (e.g., repetitive, sensory play) were viewed by some teachers as "lower quality" or less valuable learning.
- Not surprisingly, the study suggests that teacher beliefs matter.
- All teachers viewed play-based learning positively, seeing it as a powerful context for early development. For many, play offered children with NDD important opportunities for social, emotional and sometimes academic growth and participation.

How can you use this research?

This research is thought provoking for anyone working in the early years space. After reviewing this research study, it is an opportunity to reflect and consider:

- How is “inclusion” defined in your setting? is it just proximity, or real social participation?
- Using the strategies identified (adapting materials, scaffolding, collaborative support) to design more inclusive play environments for children with developmental differences.
- Unpacking alongside frameworks from your own country, such as in Australia the Early Years Framework and the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention. These frameworks have useful guidance and tools to further explore how you as an individual teacher or educator conceptualise inclusion for NDD children in mainstream settings.
- Advocating with policy-makers or centre leadership: this research provides qualitative evidence that inclusion in play needs active teacher support, resources, and training to be meaningful.

Where to from here

- Investigate children’s own perspectives: how do children with NDD experience “inclusive play”?
- Extend this research to a larger sample of teachers, or different contexts (e.g., different regions or school systems), to see whether the findings generalise.
- Explore some other literature and resources:
 - National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention- Looks like, doesn’t look like- Participation: [The National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention – Looks like, doesn't look like – Participation | Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing](#)
 - Kangas, J., Lastikka, A.-L., & Arvola, O. (2023). Inclusive Play: Defining Elements of Playful Teaching and Learning in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse ECEC. *Education Sciences*, 13(9), 956. [Inclusive Play: Defining Elements of Playful Teaching and Learning in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse ECEC](#)
 - Australian Educational Research Organisation (2023). Equity, inclusion and high expectations: Play-based learning and intentionality [Equity, inclusion and high expectations: Play-based learning and intentionality | Australian Education Research Organisation](#)

About the researchers

E. Danniels and A. Pyle work at the University of Toronto, Canada. They conduct research in early childhood education, focusing on inclusion, play, and

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This Research Snapshot was prepared by Megan Fox, PRECI Board Director and Special Education Teacher.

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