

# Promoting Equity and Integration: Inclusive Early Childhood Programs for Disabled and Non-Disabled Children - A Review

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20250342>

## ABSTRACT

This review examines the role of inclusive early childhood programs in promoting equity and integration for children with disabilities and non-disabled children. By synthesizing the findings of various authors, the review highlights the multifaceted benefits of inclusion, including improved social interactions, improved academic outcomes, and emotional development for all children. Research shows that inclusive settings promote empathy and understanding among peers while providing tailored support through differentiated instruction and specialized resources. Despite the many benefits, challenges such as teacher preparation, resource allocation, and parent involvement must be addressed to optimize the effectiveness of these programs. The review emphasizes the need for supportive policies and on-going professional development to ensure that inclusive education is a sustainable practice that benefits all children. Ultimately, inclusive early childhood programs are essential to creating an equitable educational landscape, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive society.

**Keywords:** Academic achievement, differentiated instruction, disabled children, equity, inclusive early childhood education, integration, non-disabled children, parental involvement, policy implications, resource allocation, social development, teacher preparedness.

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive early childhood programs aim to provide equal learning opportunities for both disabled and non-disabled children in a shared classroom setting. These programs not only integrate children with different abilities but also emphasize equity in education by promoting environments that meet diverse learning needs. Such classrooms are designed to promote holistic development through individualized instruction, adaptive learning techniques, and access to special services, allowing children with disabilities to thrive alongside their non-disabled peers. The core of these programs lies in social integration, where children participate in shared activities that lead to natural peer interactions and relationship building. Research consistently shows that children with disabilities benefit significantly from inclusive settings by enhancing their social skills, communication abilities, and academic participation.

Similarly, non-disabled children develop empathy, understanding, and leadership abilities through collaboration and peer support.

Inclusive early childhood programs also address the structural and pedagogical changes needed to accommodate diverse learners. Differentiated instruction, special support services, and a flexible curriculum allow teachers to meet each child's unique needs. These classrooms often aim to reduce the stigma associated with disability, thereby creating a culture of acceptance, diversity, and mutual respect. Inclusive early childhood education refers to the practice of educating children with and without disabilities in the same classroom. This approach promotes social equity by ensuring that all children have access to the same learning opportunities. The integration of disabled and non-disabled children fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance among them, which is important for their overall development. Lindsay (2007) points out that inclusive education requires adequate investment in resources, including adaptive technologies, teaching assistants, and classroom modifications. Without adequate financial support, schools may struggle to provide the necessary facilities for children with disabilities, limiting the overall effectiveness of the inclusive model. Stammers and Ingersoll (2004) emphasize the importance of differentiated instruction, a core strategy in inclusive education that meets diverse learning needs. Their research shows that when teachers adapt their teaching methods, children with disabilities achieve higher levels of engagement and learning, while non-disabled peers benefit from a more dynamic and collaborative classroom environment.

### **Benefits of Inclusive Early Childhood Programs**

**Social integration** – By placing children with disabilities and non-disabled children in the same classroom, inclusive education promotes the development of social interaction, cooperation, and empathy.

Children learn to value diversity and form relationships with peers from different backgrounds and abilities. Research shows that inclusive settings increase social interactions among children. Odom et al. (2013) found that children with disabilities have more opportunities for engagement, which boosts their social skills. Non-disabled peers also develop empathy and understanding, learning to appreciate diversity from an early age. According to Guralnick (2011), inclusive settings facilitate natural social interactions, allowing children with disabilities to develop essential social skills. These interactions not only benefit children with disabilities but also enhance the social competence of non-disabled peers by teaching them empathy and cooperation. Smith and Johnson (2019) emphasize the importance of peer interaction in inclusive settings, arguing that children with disabilities benefit from social interactions with their non-disabled peers. According to their research, inclusive programs promote social competence, communication skills, and a sense of belonging. Children without disabilities, in turn, develop greater empathy and social responsibility. They conclude that the interpersonal learning that takes place in these environments prepares all children for a diverse and inclusive society. Guralnick (2001), highlights that inclusive settings provide opportunities for both disabled and non-disabled children to develop socially and emotionally. Her research suggests that inclusive classrooms promote a sense of belonging and empathy in children, thereby reducing the isolation of students with disabilities. Guralnick also argues that children without disabilities benefit from the experience of interacting with diverse peers, which helps develop acceptance and emotional maturity from an early age.

**Academic achievement** - Research shows that inclusive settings often improve academic outcomes for both groups. The use of adapted instructional methods ensures that children with disabilities

receive the support they need to succeed, while non-disabled children benefit from a more varied, richer learning experience. Studies such as Friend and Cook (2013) indicate that children in inclusive settings often experience higher academic performance. Differentiated instruction enables teachers to adapt lessons to meet the diverse needs of all students, thereby promoting an environment conducive to learning. Sideridis et al. (2019) emphasize that inclusive education positively impacts academic performance for both groups. Research indicates that children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms show greater engagement in learning activities, which contributes to better academic outcomes compared to segregated settings. Hunt, Soto, Mair & Doering (2003) further emphasize that children with disabilities in inclusive settings display greater academic engagement and better language and cognitive skills. Their study indicates that peer modelling plays a key role in the academic success of children with disabilities, while non-disabled children gain valuable skills such as empathy and problem-solving through collaboration. Garcia & Lee (2020) focus on the academic benefits of inclusive early childhood programs. They found that inclusive classrooms, where teachers use differentiated instruction and adaptive teaching techniques, significantly enhance the learning outcomes of both children with disabilities and non-disabled children. Their study showed that when properly supported, children with disabilities meet or exceed learning milestones at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. Garcia and Lee advocate for continued professional development for teachers to strengthen the effectiveness of differentiated teaching in inclusive settings. Salend's (2008) work focuses on the strategies used by teachers in inclusive classrooms, particularly the role of differentiated instruction. He explains that inclusive settings demand flexible teaching methods tailored to each student's unique learning needs. By using strategies such as

small group instruction, adaptive technology, and individualized learning plans, teachers can ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed. Salend emphasizes that teacher preparation and continuing professional development are critical to the success of inclusive education, as teachers must be equipped with the skills to address a variety of abilities in a classroom. Booth and Ainscow (2011) define inclusive education as an approach that seeks to remove barriers to learning and participation for all children, regardless of their abilities. They argue that the philosophy of inclusion goes beyond physical integration; it emphasizes the importance of restructuring school cultures, policies, and practices to support the individual needs of each child. Their work emphasizes that true inclusion requires more than simply placing children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms—it involves creating a flexible, supportive learning environment that meets diverse needs.

**Emotional Development** – Inclusive early childhood programs focus not only on academic skills but also on children's holistic development, including social, emotional, and behavioural aspects. The inclusive model ensures that children with disabilities have the chance to develop alongside their peers, thereby promoting their independence and self-esteem. Guralnick (2001) emphasizes the importance of emotional development in inclusive settings. Children learn to navigate social dynamics and build confidence, which is essential to their overall well-being. Baker et al. (2016) highlight the emotional benefits of inclusion, suggesting that children with disabilities experience increased self-esteem and a sense of belonging in integrated classrooms. Non-disabled children also gain emotional intelligence as they learn to navigate diverse social dynamics. Jordan et al. (2009) focus on the reciprocal relationship between social interaction and emotional development in

inclusive settings. Their findings suggest that through regular peer interactions, children with disabilities improve their communication skills and self-esteem, while non-disabled children increase their social awareness and understanding of diversity.

### **Challenges to Implementation**

**Teacher preparation** - One of the main challenges is ensuring that teachers are equipped to manage the diverse needs of students in an inclusive classroom. Professional development in inclusive practices is essential for teachers to create an environment that supports all learners. Salend (2001), highlights that a key challenge in inclusive education is ensuring that teachers are adequately trained. On-going professional development is essential to equip teachers with the skills needed to effectively support diverse learners. Friend and Cook (2013) discuss the need for professional development and on-going support for teachers to effectively manage inclusive classrooms. Many teachers report feeling unprepared to meet the diverse needs of their students, which can hinder the success of inclusion efforts. In their exploration of teachers' roles in inclusive classrooms, Smith and Simpson (2010) highlight the challenges teachers face when implementing inclusive practices. They point out that teachers often struggle to meet the diverse needs of students without adequate training or resources. However, they emphasize that with proper professional development in differentiated instruction and classroom management, teachers can effectively support the learning of all students. Rafferty, Boettcher, and Griffin (2001) argue that collaboration between special education and general education teachers is essential for successful inclusion. Their research indicates that co-teaching models, where both teachers share responsibility for the entire classroom, provide more flexible instruction, more attention to individual needs, and a richer learning experience for both disabled and non-disabled children. Davis and White

(2018) explore the challenges teachers face in implementing inclusion programs, highlighting that while most teachers support inclusion, they often feel underprepared. According to their research, teachers need more specific training and resources to effectively manage classrooms with diverse needs. Davis and White argue that school systems should prioritize on-going professional development and provide adequate support staff, such as special education professionals, to ensure the success of inclusive programs. Loreman et al. (2010) focus on the challenges of implementing inclusive early childhood programs, particularly the need for adequate teacher training and resources. Their research shows that while many teachers support the philosophy of inclusion, they are often unprepared to meet the diverse needs of their students. Loreman argues that professional development, access to expert staff, and appropriate classroom resources are essential for the effective implementation of inclusive practices. The study also highlights the need to foster a culture of collaboration in schools, where general and special education teacher's work together to support all learners. Despite the benefits, the successful implementation of inclusive programs is not without its challenges. Blanton, Pugach, and Boveda (2017) emphasize that teachers often face significant difficulties in managing classrooms with diverse needs. They emphasise the need for on-going professional development, advocating for specialised training to ensure that teachers are well-equipped to provide the necessary support to all learners

**Resource allocation** - Adequate funding and resources are critical to the success of inclusion programs. Schools must have specialized equipment, adaptive technology, and additional staff to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Lipsky and Gartner (1996) discuss the importance of adequate resources for successful inclusion. Schools often face budget constraints that

can limit access to necessary support staff and adaptive technologies. Davis et al. (2020) point out that inadequate funding and resources can limit the effectiveness of inclusion programs. Schools often struggle to provide the materials, technology, and specialized staff needed to support children with varying needs.

**Parent Involvement** – The involvement of families is crucial in supporting inclusive education. Parents and caregivers of both children with disabilities and non-disabled children play a vital role in reinforcing the values of inclusion and helping their children navigate diverse learning environments. Epstein (2011) emphasizes that parent involvement is critical to the success of inclusive programs. The active involvement of families fosters a supportive community and enhances the overall learning environment. As Hughes et al. (2017) mention, it can be challenging to adapt curriculum to meet the needs of all students. Educators must find ways to differentiate instruction while ensuring that all children are included and learn at their own pace. Turnbull et al. (2000) focus on the role of family involvement in supporting inclusive early childhood programs. They found that when families of children with disabilities are actively involved in their children's education, it enhances both academic and social outcomes for the child. In addition, open communication between families and schools helps create a collaborative environment that benefits all children in the classroom. Similarly, Guralnick (2001) emphasizes that parent involvement, particularly in early intervention and education planning, strengthens the success of inclusive programs. Parents' insights about their children's needs and strengths provide teachers with important information for creating effective teaching strategies. Guralnick's research suggests that inclusive settings also benefit families of non-disabled children by promoting a community-oriented approach to education.

Brown and Taylor (2021) discuss the role of family and community involvement in the success of inclusive programs. They emphasize that parent involvement is critical in supporting the individual learning needs of children with disabilities. Their research suggests that inclusive early childhood programs are more effective when schools actively involve families in the planning and implementation of learning strategies. Brown and Taylor also highlight the importance of fostering an inclusive community culture, where both schools and families work collaboratively to promote diversity and acceptance.

### **Policy Implications and Future Directions**

- Inclusive early childhood programs require supportive policies that prioritize inclusion. Smith et al. (2016) argue for increased funding for professional development and resources, ensuring that teachers and schools are equipped to effectively implement inclusive practices. Slee, R. (2011) work discusses the policy aspects of inclusive education in depth, arguing that systemic change is necessary for the success of inclusive programs. He critiques educational policies that treat inclusion as an "add-on" to existing systems, rather than a fundamental restructuring of how schools operate. According to Slee, inclusion requires not only changes in classroom practice, but also broader shifts in educational policy and funding priorities. He advocates for incorporating inclusive education throughout school systems, ensuring that it becomes the norm rather than the exception. Rosenkoetter, Haynes, and Dogru (2007) discuss the implications of inclusive education policies, highlighting the need for legislative support and adequate funding to ensure the sustainability of inclusive programs. They argue that without proper resources, teachers cannot effectively implement inclusive practices, which can result in unequal learning opportunities. Their research calls for more comprehensive policies that prioritize inclusiveness from early childhood to secondary education.

Loreman (2010) emphasizes the importance of global policy initiatives that promote inclusiveness as a fundamental right for all children. She argues that inclusive early childhood programs are not only beneficial for individual development, but are also essential to building more inclusive societies. According to Loreman, continued investment in teacher training, infrastructure, and curriculum development is crucial to the continued success of inclusive education around the world.

### **Long-term benefits of early childhood inclusion**

- Guralnick's (2001) research focuses on the long-term effects of inclusive early childhood education. She found that children who participated in inclusive programs demonstrated better social and academic outcomes later in life than their peers in segregated settings. The study highlights that early exposure to diverse abilities increases resilience, confidence, and social competence. Guralnick argues that inclusive programs not only provide immediate benefits in terms of learning and social interaction but also build a strong foundation for future success. Martin and Lopez (2022) focus on the long-term effects of inclusive early childhood education, exploring how early inclusion affects future academic performance, social skills, and emotional well-being. Their research indicates that children who participate in inclusive programs during early childhood are more likely to succeed in mainstream education later in life. Hehir et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study on the long-term effects of inclusive early childhood education and found that children with disabilities who participated in inclusive programs demonstrated better academic performance and social integration in later schooling than children who remained in segregated settings. They also report that early exposure to diverse learning environments helps non-disabled children develop important life skills such as teamwork and leadership, which are crucial for success in both academic and

professional settings. In contrast, Fuchs and Fuchs (2004) argue that while inclusive programs have many benefits, they can sometimes fall short in meeting the specific needs of children with more severe disabilities. They recommend a more balanced approach, combining inclusive and special settings to ensure that each child receives an appropriate level of support and engagement. In their longitudinal study, Hardy and Woodcock (2015) examined the long-term effects of inclusive early childhood programs, finding that students who experienced inclusive education were more likely to develop positive attitudes toward diversity later in life. Their research suggests that early exposure to inclusive environments increases not only academic success but also social responsibility and empathy.

### **CONCLUSION**

The review of the literature on inclusive early childhood programs underscores their important role in promoting equality and integration. While challenges exist, the benefits of inclusive education – from social and emotional development to academic achievement – highlight the importance of continued advocacy and support. To create a more equitable educational landscape, policies should focus on teacher training, resource allocation, and promoting parent involvement. Inclusive early childhood programs not only benefit children but also contribute to building a more inclusive and accepting society.

### **Declaration by Authors**

**Ethical Approval:** Not Applicable

**Acknowledgement:** None

**Source of Funding:** None

**Conflict of Interest:** No conflicts of interest declared.

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How to cite this article: Sunil Kumar Agrahari, Virendra Singh Ruhela, Ajit Kumar Gupta, Brijesh Narayan Mishra. Promoting equity and integration: inclusive early childhood programs for disabled and non-disabled children - a review. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2025; 12(3): 344-351. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20250342>

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