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Editorial: Inclusion of children with social-emotional or behavioral needs in early childhood education

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Inclusion of children with social-emotional or behavioral needs in early childhood education](#)

Inclusive education has become an essential global priority, emphasizing the right of every child to participate, belong, and thrive in early learning environments. Within early childhood education (ECE), the inclusion of children with social-emotional or behavioral needs presents both challenges and opportunities for transformation. Young children develop social-emotional skills and learn how to use appropriate behaviors to meet their needs in their interactions with others in the environment (Mondi et al., 2021). Timely identification and effectively supporting young children who are experiencing challenges in social-emotional development or behavioral wellbeing is critical to the success of inclusive education in early childhood (Malik and Marwaha, 2022), as well as to achieving the maximal potential of these children later in life (Zaff et al., 2003). Preschool teachers often worry about their competence in accommodating children with potential behavioral problems (Granger et al., 2025). However, cross-cultural evidence indicates that adults' perceptions and interpretation of young children's social-emotional competence and behavioral challenges can be strongly influenced by environmental factors, cultural beliefs and expectations (Chen et al., 2017). Understanding these cultural and contextual variations is essential for developing inclusive practices and policies that are sensitive to diverse perspectives and grounded in evidence-based approaches.

The seven articles in this Research Topic advance a shared commitment to understanding and improving inclusion through diverse methodologies, geographical contexts, and theoretical lenses. Together, they illustrate how educators, researchers, and policymakers can build systems that are not only equitable but also responsive to the lived realities of children, families, and communities.

Co-creation, empowerment, and participatory approaches

A central contribution of this Research Topic is the emphasis on co-construction and shared expertise. In *Inclusive early childhood education: exploring co-creation and the process of empowerment within participatory research and practice*, (Carr-Fanning and Carr-Fanning) investigate how participatory research can empower educators and community partners to develop culturally grounded inclusion programs for children with ADHD-type behaviors in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Through collaborative curriculum design and co-created professional learning, they demonstrate how inclusion emerges as both a process and an outcome of empowerment. Their findings underscore that meaningful inclusion is contextually defined and must evolve through reflective partnerships that challenge traditional hierarchies of expertise. This participatory ethos resonates across the Research Topic, that is, inclusion cannot be achieved *for* communities but must be achieved *with* them. Empowerment, in this sense, becomes both the method and measure of inclusive success.

Professional learning and relational practice

Several contributions highlight the centrality of educator learning and reflective practice in sustaining inclusion. Dionne et al., in *Supporting the inclusion of young children in childcare settings through professional development: perceptions of educators and managers*, illustrate how sustained coaching and leadership engagement in Quebec childcare centers enhance educators' competence, confidence, and responsiveness to children's diverse needs. Their findings emphasize that professional learning must be iterative, relational, and embedded within educators' daily realities.

In the U.S. context, *Making connections for children and teachers: using classroom-based implementation supports for teaching Pyramid Model practices in Head Start programs* by Bulotsky-Shearer et al. demonstrates how practice-based coaching and communities of practice can strengthen teachers' implementation of social-emotional learning strategies. These supports not only improve classroom quality but also sustain teacher wellbeing—critical for inclusive, nurturing learning environments.

Together, these studies affirm that inclusion is enacted through people before it is institutionalized in systems. Educator capacity building, especially collaborative, reflective, coaching-based professional development, drives classroom practices that create inclusive conditions (Dunst et al., 2019). Meta-analytic and synthesis work shows that sustained, collaborative PD with coaching and feedback reliably changes teacher practice and supports child outcomes (Brunsek et al., 2020), while conceptual work on inclusive pedagogy emphasizes that teachers' pedagogical judgement and reflective practice are the locus of inclusion (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2010).

Cultural and systemic contexts of inclusion

Understanding how inclusion is shaped by local culture, social narratives, and policy frameworks is another key theme. In *Navigating inclusion: understanding social perception, educational opportunity, and challenges for neurodiverse students in Bangladeshi formal education*, Chowdhury et al. reveal how social attitudes, stigma, and systemic inequities affect the educational experiences of neurodiverse learners in Bangladesh. Their analysis underscores that inclusive reform must address deep-rooted societal narratives and resource disparities that perpetuate exclusion.

Similarly, *Portrayals of special educational needs in Norwegian ECEC psychoeducational reports: a document analysis in the context of inclusion* by Kristiansen and Uthus explores how children's needs are framed within assessment documents, analyzing tensions between deficit-based and holistic understandings of difference. Their work calls for integrating children's voices and contextual knowledge into assessment practices, emphasizing that inclusion depends as much on discourse as on pedagogy.

The meanings of “diversity,” “need,” and “support” are interpreted through social and institutional lenses. Cross-national reviews and studies show that family roles, teacher judgments, and policy frames shape how inclusion is understood and enacted (Acar et al., 2021; Chan, 2011). Consequently, while inclusion is a universal value, its realization must be culturally constructed to align with community visions and priorities (McCoy, 2022).

Curriculum design and data-informed inclusion

Curriculum and data serve as vital levers for promoting inclusion when used to inform practice. Clayback, Williford et al. contribute two key studies that illustrate this balance. In *Supporting all learners through high quality early childhood curricula: STREAMin3 implementation across Virginia*, they present a curriculum model that integrates academic, social, and emotional learning through five Core Skills and six STREAM domains. The design promotes coherence and flexibility, allowing educators to adapt to diverse learning contexts.

Their follow-up article, *Using data to promote inclusion through early childhood mental health consultation* (Clayback, Partee et al.), explores how data-driven reflection supports educators in addressing behavioral challenges without resorting to exclusionary discipline. Here, data function as tools for self-awareness and systemic learning rather than surveillance. Data-driven decision making reinforces the principle that inclusive practice is responsive to the children and families it is serving, not prescriptive.

Research on data-driven decision-making in early childhood settings emphasizes that when educators use data collaboratively and reflectively, it strengthens equitable instructional responses and child outcomes rather than narrowing practice (Sheridan et al., 2009). Similarly, high-quality, inclusive practices are most effective when they balance fidelity with flexibility, allowing teachers to adapt to diverse cultural and developmental contexts (Harn et al., 2013). Studies on practice-based coaching further highlight that

embedding data cycles within curriculum implementation supports educators' reflection, confidence, and intentional teaching (Snyder et al., 2015). The articles featured in this Research Topic reinforces that curriculum and data are not neutral tools. Rather, they become instruments of inclusion when applied through relational, reflective, and contextually responsive professional practice.

A Shared vision: contextual, empowering, and reflective inclusion

Across seven interlinked studies spanning Bangladesh, Norway, Canada, the United States, and Central and Eastern Europe, this Research Topic advances a holistic vision of inclusion, one that is data-informed, culturally responsive, and relationally grounded. We expect these contributions demonstrate the four unifying insights as described above. Together, these studies challenge us to envision inclusion not as a fixed endpoint but as a continual, context-sensitive journey of reflection, collaboration, and empowerment. As education systems worldwide strive to ensure that no learner is left behind, the insights from this Research Topic illuminate practical and philosophical pathways for realizing truly inclusive early childhood education, where every child, educator, and community can participate fully and flourish.

Author contributions

HX: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. C-IC:

Validation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. LD: Validation, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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