

Inclusive Early Childhood Education for Children with Special Needs: Challenges and Strategies

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INFO ARTICLE

ABSTRACT

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This study examines the challenges and strategies of implementing inclusive early childhood education for children with special needs through a systematic literature review of 31 academic sources. The synthesis shows that inclusion in early childhood settings remains hindered by insufficient teacher preparedness, rigid standardized curricula, limited multidisciplinary support, poor peer acceptance, parental misalignment, cultural stigma, and inadequate classroom infrastructure. However, the findings also highlight that successful inclusion emerges when learning environments apply differentiated instruction, teacher professional development, collaborative intervention planning, structured social inclusion design, and strong leadership commitment supported by family and community partnerships. Sustainable inclusion requires an educational ecosystem in which pedagogy, institutional support, parental involvement, community values, and resource management function cohesively to ensure equitable participation and positive developmental outcomes. This review provides a holistic strategic foundation to guide early childhood institutions in creating resilient and inclusive learning environments for children with special needs.

Keywords:

children with special needs, early childhood education, inclusion strategies, inclusive classrooms, sustainable inclusion



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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive early childhood education has become one of the most urgent priorities in global education systems as increasing numbers of children with special needs begin their learning journey in mainstream early education settings. Inclusion is not merely a matter of physical placement but demands full participation, acceptance, and equitable access to learning opportunities for children who present diverse developmental, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics. International evidence shows that early inclusive interventions promote long-term academic performance, social integration, and mental health outcomes, making early childhood the most strategic phase to embed inclusion (Hehir et al., 2016). However, transforming early childhood education into a genuinely inclusive ecosystem remains a significant challenge for schools, teachers, policymakers, and families, particularly because inclusion requires structural, pedagogical, and socio-emotional transformation rather than only administrative compliance (Asmara et al., 2025).

In early childhood settings, teachers are the most critical actors determining the success of inclusion because they manage learning environments, interactions, and teaching strategies. Yet research indicates that many educators lack confidence in

handling diverse student needs because they face behavioral challenges, communication barriers, and learning differences that demand differentiated pedagogical approaches (Ngadni et al., 2023). Teachers report difficulties in modifying learning tasks, designing accessible assessments, and managing large classrooms without compromising attention to children requiring individualized support. These barriers reflect a systemic issue, as teacher preparation programs in many regions provide limited training specific to inclusive early childhood practice. Consequently, inclusion becomes fragmented and inconsistent, often relying on improvisation rather than institutionalized professional competence.

Another core barrier in inclusive early childhood education is social acceptance among peers and school communities. Children with special needs often face stigmatization, misunderstanding, or exclusion as a result of limited awareness, lack of social-emotional literacy, and insufficient modelling of inclusive interactions (Juvonen et al., 2019). Inclusion does not flourish simply because children are placed in the same classroom; rather, social belonging emerges when peer relationships are intentionally supported through empathy-oriented pedagogies and structured collaboration. Without intentional social inclusion strategies, children with special needs may remain physically present in classrooms but socially isolated, reducing developmental benefits and potentially heightening emotional frustration.

Inclusive early childhood education must also ensure equitable access to participation. Beyond physical accessibility, participation refers to a child's opportunity to engage meaningfully in learning activities, express ideas, and demonstrate competence (Laumann et al., 2019). Children with disabilities often experience restricted participation when learning environments, instructions, or classroom routines are not adapted according to sensory, behavioral, communicative, or cognitive needs. Structural accessibility therefore includes the design of learning spaces, routines, instructional formats, and assessment practices that take into account neurodiversity and individualized learning pathways (Clouder et al., 2020). When participation barriers persist, inclusion becomes symbolic rather than transformative.

Research also identifies school-level management and leadership as a major determinant of inclusive education outcomes. Administrators who prioritize compliance without pedagogical transformation often fail to allocate adequate resources, support systems, instructional coaching, or multidisciplinary collaboration (Abubakar et al., 2024). Collaboration among teachers, special educators, psychologists, and families is crucial for ensuring individualized support that enables children to flourish, yet such collaboration is still underdeveloped in many early childhood institutions (Majoko, 2018). Without strong leadership commitment, inclusive programs tend to lack consistency and sustainability.

Family involvement is equally central to inclusive success. Parents often struggle with emotional, cultural, or informational barriers that affect their willingness to participate in inclusive decision-making. In many cases, parental expectations do not align with teachers' instructional goals, causing friction and miscommunication that disrupt learning consistency across home and school (Yunus et al., 2021). Schools need deliberate mechanisms to empower parents through emotional support, knowledge sharing, and sustained partnership rather than episodic communication. Without this foundation, parents of children with special needs may feel unsupported while teachers may perceive limited cooperation from families.

In addition to structural barriers, cultural and attitudinal barriers also hinder full inclusion. Societal beliefs about disability often manifest in educational policies, teacher mindsets, and peer interactions. Many teachers express a desire to support inclusion but unconsciously hold deficit-based perspectives that treat children with disabilities as problems to be solved instead of individuals with strengths to cultivate (Astuti & Putri, 2024). The lack of understanding of neurodiversity can discourage teachers from using individualized learning approaches and instead favor traditional standardized instruction that disadvantages children with special needs (Lindner & Schwab, 2025). Addressing inclusion therefore requires shifting beliefs as much as improving skills.

Although Indonesia has adopted inclusive education policies across early childhood institutions, multiple studies indicate implementation challenges caused by limited readiness of institutions, inadequate training, insufficient infrastructure, and inconsistent monitoring systems (Lestariningrum, 2017; Nurani, 2019). Schools that actively adopt inclusive labels may not yet demonstrate inclusive pedagogical and managerial practices because policy adoption precedes practical transformation. Several community-based early childhood institutions have shown promising inclusive potential, yet scaling successful practices remains slow due to fragmented resource distribution and uneven capacity building (Haliqa et al., 2024).

Despite increasing scholarly attention, existing literature still presents notable research gaps. First, Ismiatiun and Atika (2020) examined challenges in inclusive early childhood education but did not provide a structured pedagogical framework to overcome these barriers. Second, Majoko (2018) analyzed the effectiveness of inclusive teaching but focused on primary grades rather than early childhood, limiting generalization to younger learners. Third, Asmara et al. (2025) explored opportunities for inclusion but did not formulate a sustainable ecosystem model combining instructional strategies and management practices. Addressing these gaps requires a comprehensive synthesis of both challenges and implementable strategies across pedagogical, structural, and socio-cultural dimensions.

The novelty of this research lies in synthesizing inclusion challenges alongside strategic solutions that integrate teaching practices, leadership, parental partnership, resource management, and socio-cultural transformation in early childhood education. Therefore, this study aims to systematically review the challenges and strategies in implementing inclusive early childhood education for children with special needs, forming a holistic conceptual foundation that can support sustainable inclusive practices in schools.

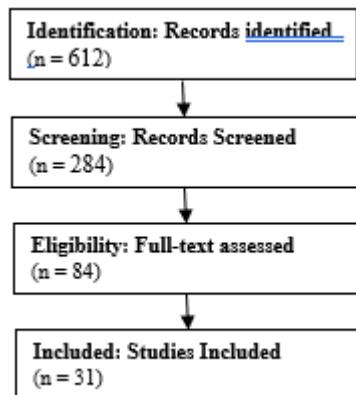
METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesize conceptual and empirical research related to inclusive early childhood education for children with special needs. Articles were collected from Scopus, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar using the keywords “inclusive early childhood education”, “children with special needs”, “inclusive classrooms”, and “inclusive learning strategies”. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and proceedings published within the last ten years were prioritized to capture contemporary trends in policy and classroom practices.

The search protocol involved defining inclusion criteria (studies focusing on early childhood inclusion and children with special needs, English or Indonesian

language, and accessible full text) and exclusion criteria (studies outside early childhood age groups, non-inclusive special education models, and publications without specific discussion of implementation strategies). The data filtering process is summarized in the PRISMA flow: Identification (n = 612) → Screening (n = 248) → Eligibility (n = 84) → Included (n = 31).

Data were analyzed using thematic synthesis to categorize recurring concepts related to implementation challenges and effective inclusive strategies. Themes were classified into pedagogical, structural, family partnership, resource-management, and socio-cultural dimensions, which serve as the analytical foundation for the discussion and enable the formulation of a comprehensive inclusive education framework.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges of Implementing Inclusive Early Childhood Education for Children with Special Needs

The implementation of inclusive early childhood education presents significant and multidimensional challenges that affect the ability of schools to provide individualized support for children with special needs. One of the most fundamental barriers is the lack of teacher preparedness to address diverse developmental, cognitive, and behavioral needs in the classroom. Many teachers enter early childhood education programs with limited exposure to inclusive pedagogies, resulting in anxiety, lack of confidence, and inconsistent practices when facing children requiring differentiated attention (Ngadni et al., 2023). Teachers must simultaneously manage classroom routines, maintain engagement for neurotypical learners, and apply individualized support for children with special needs, creating an instructional burden that becomes overwhelming without structured professional training (Ismiatun & Atika, 2020). Consequently, inclusion often becomes symbolic where children with special needs are physically present but do not receive equitable participation opportunities.

Curriculum design further compounds inclusion difficulties because early childhood programs are frequently rooted in standardized learning expectations that prioritize uniform developmental milestones. Children with special needs do not develop at the same pace or through identical learning pathways, causing conventional curriculum goals to mismatch their learning profiles. When teaching plans lack flexibility, children with special needs are unable to access learning experiences as intended, resulting in frustration, disengagement, or disruptive behavior that teachers often misinterpret as disobedience rather than communication of unmet developmental needs (Laumann et al., 2019). The inflexibility of curriculum frameworks demonstrates that inclusion is not only a pedagogical challenge but a structural challenge embedded in policies that privilege standardization over differentiation (Lindner & Schwab, 2025).

Another major challenge involves insufficient support systems for teachers. Inclusive early childhood education ideally requires collaboration among classroom teachers, special educators, therapists, psychologists, and learning assistants, yet such multidisciplinary models are rarely available in many early childhood institutions (Abubakar et al., 2024). Teachers are left to independently diagnose challenges, modify teaching, and manage behavior without specialist assistance. This lack of systemic support not only undermines inclusion quality but also leads to teacher burnout, which further weakens classroom emotional climates and reduces teacher willingness to adopt inclusive practices (Majoko, 2018). The absence of structured professional ecosystems signals a deeper managerial issue in inclusive early childhood implementation.

Social barriers inside classrooms also remain persistent. Even when teachers support inclusion, peers may not demonstrate social acceptance toward children with special needs. Research shows that children with disabilities experience peer rejection or are excluded from collaborative play, group work, or outdoor activities because classmates are unsure how to communicate with them or because educators do not explicitly model empathy and inclusive interaction (Juvonen et al., 2019). Without structured social-emotional learning, neurotypical children may avoid interacting with peers who respond differently, communicate nonverbally, or require longer processing time. When social isolation persists, placement without belonging becomes psychologically harmful and contradicts the aims of inclusion.

Parental engagement also influences inclusion outcomes. Parents of neurotypical children sometimes express concerns that inclusive classrooms may reduce academic focus or introduce behavioral challenges, creating resistance toward inclusive programs (Yunus et al., 2021). Meanwhile, parents of children with special needs may feel marginalized or ignored in decision-making processes when schools do not communicate progress transparently or respectfully. These communication gaps disrupt home–school consistency, limiting the reinforcement of children’s developmental goals outside the classroom. When inclusion is not understood as a shared responsibility, its sustainability is compromised.

Cultural factors also shape how inclusion is perceived and practiced. In some educational communities, children with special needs are misunderstood due to stigma or deficit-based beliefs that view disability as abnormality rather than neurological diversity. Teachers who internalize these beliefs may unconsciously adopt lower expectations or avoid providing leadership roles and collaborative opportunities to children with special needs, limiting their growth (Astuti & Putri, 2024). Cultural barriers can also influence parental expectations, shaping whether families support or resist inclusive programs. Therefore, inclusion is not only a pedagogical shift but a cultural transformation requiring broad-based community awareness.

Beyond human resources and socio-cultural barriers, material and infrastructure inadequacies also hinder inclusion. Many schools lack adaptive learning tools, sensory materials, visual schedules, communication aids, and safe classroom layouts to accommodate diverse sensory, behavioral, and mobility needs. Teachers struggle to modify learning activities when there are no accessible tools or funding to create differentiated learning environments (Gafur & Salsabila, 2022). Resource constraints demonstrate that inclusion requires financial commitment, not only instructional commitment.

The complexity of these challenges demonstrates that inclusion in early childhood education cannot rely solely on teacher goodwill. All barriers—teacher

preparedness, curriculum rigidity, limited interdisciplinary support, peer exclusion, parental inconsistency, cultural stigma, and infrastructure limitations—interact and reinforce one another. When schools do not address these barriers systematically, inclusion becomes fragmented and unstable rather than transformative.

Strategic Models to Strengthen Inclusive Early Childhood Education for Children with Special Needs

Research demonstrates that inclusive early childhood education can succeed when schools adopt systemic strategies that integrate pedagogy, leadership, collaboration, and socio-cultural empowerment. The first requirement is establishing instructional differentiation, which involves modifying teaching content, learning processes, participation formats, and assessment pathways to accommodate diverse learning needs (Lindner & Schwab, 2025). Differentiated instruction recognizes that children learn differently and tailors learning activities to provide multiple pathways for participation rather than forcing uniform outcomes. This includes multimodal learning tools, visual cues, sensory support, simplified instructions, and flexible pacing to ensure children with special needs access learning without compromising dignity or autonomy.

Teacher professional development is a cornerstone of sustainable inclusion. Schools need training programs that focus on disability awareness, behavior interpretation, assistive instructional technologies, social-emotional facilitation, and collaborative planning. Teachers who receive structured preparation demonstrate stronger confidence, reduced stress, and more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Ngadni et al., 2023). Coaching from special educators also enhances classroom practice because teachers gain actionable strategies instead of theoretical exposure. Therefore, empowering teachers is the most pragmatic starting point for reform because teacher competence directly shapes classroom experiences for children with special needs.

Strategic collaboration between teachers, specialists, and families forms the backbone of inclusive support systems. Schools must institutionalize multidisciplinary meetings to align intervention plans, learning targets, and behavioral strategies across home and school settings. Shared data tracking, communication logs, and regular progress conferences reduce misunderstandings and ensure uniform support for the child (Abubakar et al., 2024). This collective approach builds emotional security for children because expectations from adults remain consistent across environments.

To sustain participation, teachers need structured social inclusion strategies that encourage positive peer interactions. Classroom programs promoting empathy, cooperative play, and shared responsibility visibly improve social participation for children with special needs (Juvonen et al., 2019). Teachers can assign collaborative learning roles, rotate group responsibilities, and incorporate empathy-rich storytelling to normalize emotional and behavioral differences. Social inclusion requires intentional instructional design rather than hoping peers will include one another spontaneously.

Strategic Dimension	Core Implementation Features	Expected Outcomes	Supporting Sources
Differentiated instruction	Flexible curriculum, multimodal learning tools, adaptive assessment	Increased participation and learning accessibility	Lindner & Schwab (2025); Laumann et al. (2019)
Teacher professional development	Disability pedagogy, behavioral scaffolding, assistive strategies	Higher teacher confidence and instructional effectiveness	Ngadni et al. (2023); Majoko (2018)
Multidisciplinary collaboration	Shared intervention plans, coaching, progress monitoring	Consistent support across home-school contexts	Abubakar et al. (2024); Yunus et al. (2021)
Social inclusion design	Cooperative tasks, empathy modelling, peer-mediated learning	Reduction of stigma and improved peer belonging	Juvonen et al. (2019); Asmara et al. (2025)

Leadership and policy alignment are crucial to sustain long-term inclusion. Administrators must adopt emotionally supportive learning visions that recognize inclusion as an institutional goal rather than a mere policy requirement. Budget allocation for training, infrastructure, and inclusive materials is part of leadership responsibility. Without financial and managerial support, inclusion remains temporary and relies on individual teacher initiative (Abubakar et al., 2024). Strategic leadership ensures that inclusive practices persist even when teacher turnover occurs.

Community awareness campaigns and parental empowerment further strengthen inclusion. When parents understand disability and celebrate development rather than performance comparison, home environments become psychologically safer for children. Schools must train parents not only to support academic reinforcement but to nurture self-confidence, emotional expression, and social participation (Hasanah & Zailani, 2025). Inclusion achieves its true meaning when families, teachers, and communities collaborate to dismantle stigma and normalize neurodiversity.

Overall, inclusive education strategies demand synchronized reforms across instructional, managerial, and cultural dimensions. When strategies reinforce each other, inclusion becomes an ecosystem rather than an activity.

Building Sustainable and Future-Ready Inclusive Early Childhood Education Ecosystems

Sustainability in inclusive early childhood education requires a holistic ecosystem rather than fragmented interventions delivered only at the classroom level. Without systemic support, strategies intended to promote inclusion may be temporary, inconsistent, and dependent on individual educators rather than institutional capacity. Sustainable inclusion begins with a foundational shift in educational values, where schools identify inclusion not as a social obligation but as a developmental right that ensures every child, regardless of need, has equitable access to learning experiences. Research demonstrates that inclusive success emerges when pedagogical practices, institutional policies, parental involvement, community awareness, and specialist

support systems intersect and reinforce one another rather than operating independently (Asmara et al., 2025). This multidimensional approach situates inclusion as part of a school identity and culture rather than an isolated instructional model.

Teacher agency is a decisive component of a sustainable inclusive ecosystem because instructional quality determines whether children with special needs meaningfully participate in learning. Professional development must move beyond occasional workshops and become continuous through coaching, peer learning, classroom modelling, and reflective practice to integrate inclusive pedagogy into daily routines rather than sporadic programs (Ngadni et al., 2023). Sustainability requires teachers to be emotionally supported as well, because research shows that meaningful inclusion thrives in learning environments where teachers feel safe to experiment, seek help, and discuss challenges without fear of judgment (Majoko, 2018). A school climate that encourages professional vulnerability and curiosity fosters lifelong learning for educators, which in turn benefits children with diverse developmental needs.

Leadership and school management also determine whether inclusion becomes persistent. Administrators who embrace inclusive transformation allocate budgets, recruit professional support personnel, redesign classrooms, improve accessibility, and embed inclusive indicators into school evaluation systems to ensure that inclusion is monitored as rigorously as academic quality (Abubakar et al., 2024). Without such investment, inclusion remains aspirational rather than empirical. Strong school leadership also involves establishing clear communication channels and interdisciplinary working groups that monitor children's progress through shared intervention plans rather than through segregated responsibilities. When leadership recognizes inclusion as a strategic investment rather than a compliance requirement, staff commitment increases and collaborative culture becomes a collective norm.

Family involvement is another pillar that influences sustainability. Children with special needs learn most effectively when interventions extend beyond formal school hours and are reinforced at home with emotional safety and consistent behavioral cues. Parents who understand inclusion and developmental pathways show stronger collaboration and provide psychological and academic continuity to children outside the classroom (Yunus et al., 2021). However, parent participation is strengthened not by obligation but by emotional empowerment, informational support, and respectful decision-making collaboration. Schools must help parents experience acceptance rather than guilt, anxiety, or stigma so they can support children without fear of judgment. Home-school reciprocity becomes a sustainable mechanism when parents, teachers, and specialists share goals rather than expectations and pressure.

Community and cultural contexts also influence the durability of inclusion. Many of the obstacles in inclusive implementation arise not from teaching limitations but from persistent societal stigma regarding disability and neurological differences. Cultural norms that treat disability as deficiency directly weaken social inclusion because they reduce empathy among peers, lead to lower expectations from teachers, and cause withdrawal among caregivers (Astuti & Putri, 2024). Sustainable inclusion requires long-term cultural transformation that shifts the narrative of disability from judgment to acceptance. Schools have strategic power to shape cultural change through public education, awareness campaigns, community partnerships, and the celebration of neurodiversity in learning cultures. When community values evolve, inclusive learning becomes self-reinforcing rather than fragile.

Infrastructure and resource planning complete the ecosystem of sustainable inclusion. Many schools discontinue inclusive activities not due to lack of commitment but because of limited classroom materials, assistive learning technologies, or specialized equipment. However, research emphasizes that inclusion is not dependent on expensive tools but on strategic adaptation of learning environments based on sensory, communicative, and cognitive needs (Gafur & Salsabila, 2022). Visual schedules, communication boards, quiet corners, tactile materials, and low-cost assistive supports can create safe learning spaces when educators understand how to integrate them effectively. Sustainability therefore depends on resource management rather than financial abundance, requiring school leaders to strategically plan procurement, maintenance, and equitable distribution of inclusive materials.

Future-ready inclusion also requires preparing children for lifelong resilience and social belonging beyond early schooling. Schools that embed empathy, emotional expression, autonomy, communication, and collaboration into early childhood curricula produce children who can adapt to diverse social environments and navigate social challenges in later academic stages (Marantika et al., 2024). Sustainability is not simply about keeping children with special needs inside classrooms; rather, it is about ensuring long-term developmental outcomes in emotional well-being, identity confidence, self-advocacy, and collective belonging. When children grow up in inclusive ecosystems, they not only succeed individually but also become future citizens who treat difference with compassion rather than fear.

Taken together, sustainable inclusion in early childhood education requires coherence between instructional strategies, teacher professional support, school leadership, parental partnership, community culture, and long-term developmental vision. Inclusion cannot be maintained by one component alone; durable success emerges only when these dimensions intersect and function cohesively to guarantee children with special needs not only physical presence in the classroom but full participation and belonging.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review demonstrates that inclusive early childhood education for children with special needs demands structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural transformation rather than isolated or symbolic placement of children inside classrooms. Research consistently shows that barriers to inclusion arise from insufficient teacher preparation, rigid curricula, weak multidisciplinary systems, peer exclusion, parental misalignment, cultural stigma, and inadequate infrastructure. Conversely, when inclusive instruction prioritizes differentiation, professional development, collaborative intervention planning, social-emotional cultivation, and leadership investment, children with special needs experience equitable access to participation and developmental progress comparable to their peers.

In line with these findings, sustainable inclusion requires a long-term educational ecosystem supported by engaged leadership, empowered educators, emotionally secure families, community awareness, and resource-responsive learning environments. When inclusion becomes embedded as a school identity rather than an administrative mandate, children with special needs gain not only access to learning but also social belonging, emotional growth, and lifelong developmental resilience. For early childhood education to be truly inclusive, schools must cultivate institutional cultures where diversity is

accommodated with compassion and learning pathways are designed to empower every child.

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