

ABSTRACT

Title of Capstone: BEYOND PLACEMENT: BUILDING A
CULTURE OF INCLUSION IN
AMERICAN EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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Nearly six decades after Congress codified the educational rights of children with disabilities, the United States still falls short of its own ideals. As recently as 2022, 42% of preschoolers with disabilities were served outside inclusive early-learning settings, and national trends across the last four decades show only modest movement. The purpose of this study is to explain and address this persistent under-representation by situating the problem within the mixed-delivery landscape of U.S. early learning and recent federal policy shifts. Anchored in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and an iceberg model of culture, the work positions inclusion as both structural and cultural as it moves from context, to reflection, to action. Section 1 frames the problem of practice and guiding research questions in relation to program structures that shape

opportunities for inclusion. Section 2 details an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-integrated review method, considers the implications and limits of today's digital research landscape, and synthesizes the literature across three themes—1) historical and policy forces, 2) ecosystems as drivers of practice, and 3) cultivating a sustainable culture of inclusion—to identify root causes. Section 3 presents the Inclusion Awareness Program (IAP) and a bias-habit-breaking training module aligned with the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) Indicator S12. Section 4 outlines the evaluation approach emphasizing how individual growth is reinforced and sustained by system-level conditions. The findings present a replicable, systems-aware professional learning model that links culture change to measurable improvements in inclusive practice.

Keywords: early childhood education, disability, inclusion, culture

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEMS

by

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Dedication

This work is lovingly dedicated to the memory of my father, whose spirit guided my every step, and to my mother, whose unending prayers and faith have carried me through every challenge and triumph. To my partner, family, and friends, thank you for your encouragement and unwavering belief in me. And to every student and family whose stories have shaped my purpose, to the colleagues who walk beside me in service of inclusion, and to the professors who opened doors to deeper understanding, this journey is possible because of you. May this work honor the countless hands, hearts, and hopes that make education a truly human endeavor.

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Section 1

Disability touches many families. Globally, approximately 1.3 billion people, about 16% of the world's population, live with significant disabilities (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). In the United States (U.S.), nearly one in six children is identified with a developmental delay, and 1 in 27 infants and toddlers receives early intervention services (U.S. Department of Education [U.S. ED] & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2023). Despite this prevalence, people with disabilities continue to face widespread discrimination and exclusion in many areas of life, including education and employment (WHO, 2023).

The U.S. has codified inclusion as a legal and ethical imperative. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and civil rights legislation administered by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) prohibit discrimination and promote equitable access to education, employment, and services. Yet legal protections have not guaranteed systemic inclusion. As of 2022, 42% of preschool-aged children with disabilities continued to receive special education services in non-inclusive settings (U.S. ED Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2024), a figure that has remained largely unchanged for over 40 years (U.S. ED & HHS, 2023).

The most frequently reported barrier to early childhood inclusion has been attitudes and beliefs (U.S. ED & HHS, 2015; Division for Early Childhood (DEC) & the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2019), often shaped by misconceptions, limited understanding of inclusion, reluctance to change established practices, and stereotypes about children with disabilities (U.S. ED & HHS, 2015). These persistent trends suggest that inclusion is not the result of policies or legal mandates, rather product of an entire system in which at its core are key assumptions about

teaching and learning held by all stakeholders, often implicit, yet deeply influential (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center [ECTA], 2023.).

A Mixed Delivery System

A mixed delivery system (MDS) is the predominant model through which most U.S. states provide publicly funded preschool, blending services across local education agencies (LEAs) and non-LEA settings such as Head Start programs, private childcare centers, faith based organizations, family childcare homes, and university laboratory schools. This structure allows states to expand capacity by leveraging the existing community-based EC infrastructure, addressing workforce and facility shortages while maintaining family choice in program type, hours, and cultural context (Garver et al., 2023). During the 2020–2021 school year, 89% of state-funded preschool programs operated through an MDS, and at least eight states enrolled more than half of their preschool children in non-LEA settings (Garver et al., 2023).

The benefits of an MDS are both structural and social. MDS models add workforce and space capacity, utilizing experienced early childhood educators and preexisting community classrooms. Teachers in non-LEA programs are often more racially, ethnically, and linguistically aligned with the families they serve, promoting culturally responsive pedagogy (Garver et al., 2023). Non-LEA sites frequently offer full-day and year-round care, wraparound services, and continuity of care that allows children to transition from infancy to preschool within the same program, an advantage for working families (Garver et al., 2023). Additionally, by directing public preschool funding to non-LEA programs, states strengthen small businesses and nonprofit childcare providers, offering financial stability in a sector that typically relies on unstable tuition and subsidy funding (Garver et al., 2023).

Along with these advantages, MDS implementation poses significant coordination and equity challenges. States must navigate differing funding sources (e.g., state preschool dollars, federal Head Start funds, childcare subsidies), align disparate quality standards, and ensure equitable pay and benefits across settings. Providers in non-LEA environments often face barriers to participation due to stricter credentialing requirements, inconsistent facility standards, or limited administrative capacity (Garver et al., 2023). Nonetheless, states such as Alabama, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and West Virginia illustrate that a well-governed MDS, supported by aligned quality standards, technical assistance, and equitable funding, can ensure that high-quality, inclusive preschool opportunities reach children in diverse communities while sustaining a broad base of early learning providers (Garver et al., 2023).

Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education

Early Intervention (EI) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) represent the federal government's sustained commitment to supporting young children with disabilities and developmental delays from birth through age five (ECTA, n.d.). EI serves infants and toddlers under age three through individualized services provided in the child's natural environment, typically the home or community-based programs they would otherwise attend if not disabled. ECSE extends these supports to preschool-aged children and mandates education in the least restrictive environment (LRE), ensuring participation alongside peers without disabilities whenever appropriate. Both EI and ECSE are entitlement programs under IDEA, guaranteeing eligible children the right to receive services at no cost for families (ECTA, n.d.).

Despite this legal mandate, national participation rates in EI and ECSE remain modest relative to school-age special education. Only about 3% of children under age three receive EI services, and roughly 5% of three- and four-year-olds participate in

ECSE, compared to approximately 12% of school-age children receiving special education (National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], 2023). This “stair-step” pattern of identification, rising with age, suggests that many young children who could benefit from early intervention are either not identified or experience delays in service access.

Demographic disparities further exacerbate these inequities. White children are more likely than Black, Hispanic/Latino, or Asian peers to receive EI and ECSE services; however, this pattern reverses at school age, when Black children become disproportionately represented in special education (NIEER, 2023). Boys are also more likely than girls to receive early services, 1.7 times more likely in EI and 2.3 times more likely in ECSE and are more frequently placed in segregated settings (NIEER, 2023). These trends highlight both under-identification in the early years and potential over-identification later in schooling.

Taken together, EI and ECSE illustrate both the promise and limitations of the nation’s commitment to early identification and inclusive support. While IDEA establishes a legal framework promoting access, participation, and inclusion, implementation continues to reveal systemic inequities. These gaps connect directly to broader debates about access, participation, and belonging (U.S. ED & HHS, 2023; DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

Inclusion

Federal attention to inclusion in EC began with the 1986 amendments to IDEA, which established the legal and fiscal foundation for serving children with disabilities ages birth to five years old in inclusive settings across public schools, Head Start, community programs, and childcare.

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (now IDEA) federal law has required an annual report to Congress documenting national progress in serving children with disabilities. The 46th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2024 (U.S. ED & OSEP, 2024) documents steady progress toward inclusive early childhood practices. In 2022, approximately 438,988 infants and toddlers, or 4% of the birth-to-age-two resident population (i.e., all children within that age range living in the United States, as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau, regardless of program enrollment), received Part C (Section 618) services, with participation rates rising steadily since 2013. These services occurred primarily in natural environments, with more than 90% of infants and toddlers receiving intervention in the home and another 6% in community-based settings. When children exit Part C at age 3, the most common outcome is entry into Part B’s preschool program (Section 619); during 2021–2022, about 34.5% transitioned to preschool special education, while 4.7% continued Part C services beyond age 3. Within Section 619, approximately 810,706 children ages 3–5, or 7.1% of the population, were served in 2022. Developmental delay and speech or language impairment were the most common disability categories, and more than half of preschoolers spent time in regular EC programs where they received most special education services, signaling a sustained national commitment to inclusion.

These national averages, however, mask substantial variation in how inclusion is implemented across states. Under Part C, states have discretion to define “developmental delay,” include infants and toddlers “at risk” of delay, and allow children older than three who are eligible for Section 619 to remain in Part C until kindergarten (NIEER, 2023). Only eight jurisdictions—Colorado, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, and New York—permit these older

children to continue receiving early intervention services (NIEER, 2023). Such policy differences result in significant variability in the proportion of children served and the extent to which services occur in inclusive home or community settings. Similar discretion exists under Section 619, where states determine whether to employ the “developmental delay” category for children ages 3–5, influencing both eligibility and placement patterns (NIEER, 2023).

Funding structures also shape the uneven implementation of inclusion across jurisdictions (NIEER, 2024). For example, schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) do not receive dedicated Section 619 preschool funds; instead, they report services for five-year-old children under Section 611, which governs school-age special education (NIEER, 2023). Similarly, the four outlying areas (American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands) and the three freely associated states (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau) do not receive Section 619 allocations, although they may report preschool-aged children served through Section 611 (NIEER, 2023).

The state in which a child lives strongly determines access to EI and ECSE services and whether those services are provided alongside non-disabled peers. During the 2020–2021 school year, 57% of children receiving ECSE participated in a regular early childhood program, with rates ranging from more than 80% in Colorado to less than one-third in Arizona and Michigan. Participation in other publicly funded programs also varied widely: approximately 13% of preschoolers with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) were enrolled in Head Start, 6% of infants and toddlers with an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) were in Early Head Start, and roughly 35% of preschoolers with IEPs attended state pre-K (NIEER, 2023). Financing differences further compound these disparities. Under Part B, Section 619 funds flow from the U.S.

ED to state education agencies, which distribute most resources to local districts, while Part C funds are allocated as formula grants to support statewide EI systems for children birth to two and their families. States differ considerably in their reliance on federal, state, or local funding sources: fourteen states report federal funds as their primary source for early intervention, thirty-two rely primarily on state funds, and three depend mainly on local sources (NIEER, 2023). Variation across states underscores the uneven reach of these programs. As illustrated in Figure 4, Colorado served nearly all children receiving ECSE in regular EC programs, whereas five states served less than one-fifth of children in such inclusive settings (NIEER, 2023).

Over time, the conceptual framing of inclusion has evolved beyond IDEA's placement mandate in a "natural environment" toward a holistic understanding that encompasses access, participation, and belonging as the defining features of high-quality early childhood inclusion (U.S. ED, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS] & Office of Elementary and Secondary Education [OESE], 2025). Belonging reflects a multidimensional experience characterized by being present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, and needed (TIES Center, 2024). These interrelated dimensions move inclusion beyond access to physical spaces toward authentic membership and emotional connection within the learning community.

As jointly defined by DEC and NAEYC (2009), EC inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and

development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality EC programs and services are access, participation, and supports (DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This inquiry is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which conceptualizes human development as the result of dynamic, reciprocal interactions between individuals and the multiple, nested environments in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1994). First articulated in *Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development* (1977) and later refined in *Ecological Models of Human Development* (1994), the theory identifies five interrelated systems: the microsystem (immediate relationships and settings such as family, school, and peers), mesosystem (connections among those settings), exosystem (social structures that indirectly influence the child, such as parental workplaces or community resources), macrosystem (societal ideologies, laws, and cultural norms), and chronosystem (the dimension of time and sociohistorical context).

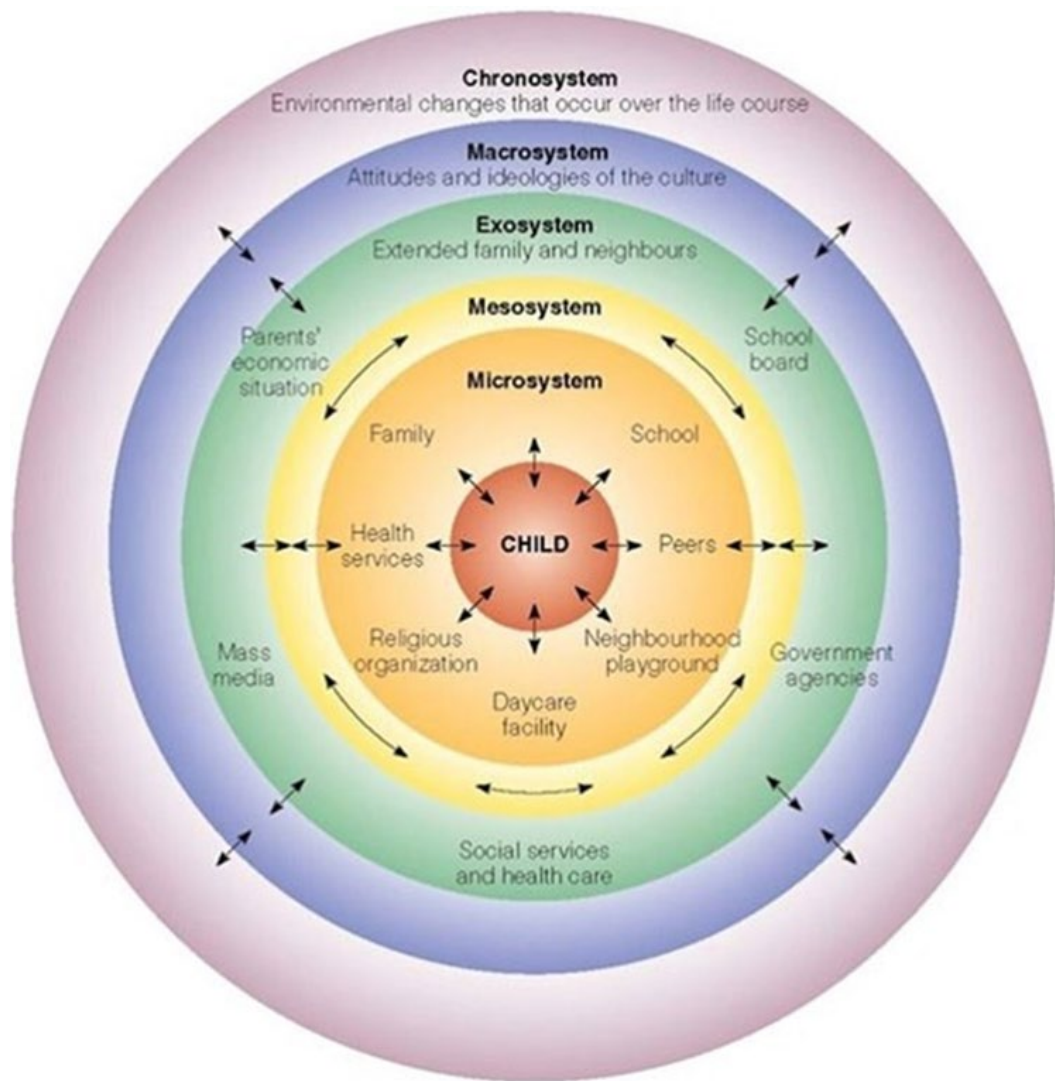
Bronfenbrenner emphasized that development is shaped not only by the child's immediate surroundings but also by the "progressive accommodation between the growing human organism and the changing environments in which it actually lives and grows" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). In the context of early childhood inclusion in the U.S., this ecological lens reveals how federal policy shifts, cultural beliefs, and systemic structures— particularly within the macrosystem—shape conditions for inclusion at the classroom (microsystem) and program (mesosystem) levels.

This model, as illustrated in Figure 1, provides the theoretical foundation for viewing inclusion not simply as a structural or policy objective but as a cultural process unfolding across ecological levels. Within the macrosystem, cultural ideologies, policy

priorities, and societal beliefs about disability shape the meanings and expectations that filter downward through institutions, communities, and classrooms (Odom et al. 2004). These macro-level forces interact with mesosystem and microsystem dynamics—such as educator attitudes, leadership practices, and family engagement—to determine whether inclusive ideals are realized in practice. In this sense, cultural change toward inclusion depends on reciprocal adaptation between individual mindsets and institutional environments, a principle consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s concept of progressive accommodation (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514).

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Rhodes, 2013).



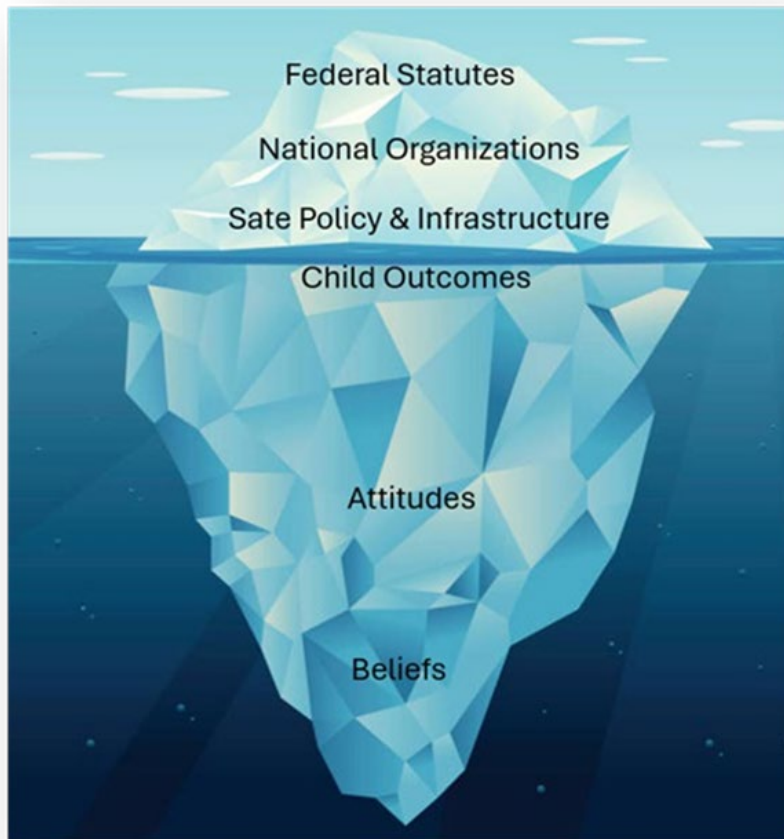
Note: Adapted from Rhodes, 2013. In the public domain.

To reveal the cultural dimensions beneath these systems, Hall's 1976 iceberg metaphor is employed (see Figure 5). Above the waterline, the legal frameworks and mixed delivery systems reflect the macrosystem's structural dimensions—federal

statutes, state policies, and organizational infrastructures that make inclusion observable through compliance, funding, and program access. Just below the surface, child outcomes occupy the intermediary space between structure and culture, signaling how systemic policies and practices manifest in children's developmental, social, and academic experiences. Beneath the waterline lie the attitudinal and belief systems, hereafter referred to as mindset, that Bronfenbrenner identified as integral to the macrosystem. These submerged elements form the unseen foundation of inclusion, influencing how laws are interpreted, how programs are enacted, and how belonging is either cultivated or constrained within early learning environments. Thus, the iceberg metaphor complements Bronfenbrenner's ecological model by revealing that authentic inclusion in ECE depends not only on visible systems of policy and practice but also on the deep cultural mindsets that give those systems meaning. This dual-lens framework guides the forthcoming analysis and the design of the Inclusion Awareness Program (IAP), a professional learning model aimed at shifting mindsets and fostering a culture of belonging across all ecological levels of the ECE system.

Figure 2

Iceberg metaphor model

**Problem of Practice**

Improvement initiatives are most effective when they are grounded in a well-understood problem of practice (PoP) framed through multiple modes of evidence that illuminate its systemic root causes (Leach et al., 2021). A PoP is defined as “a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes” (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.,

as cited in Leach et al., 2021). Within early ECE, the persistent underrepresentation of young children with disabilities in inclusive preschool settings exemplifies such a problem. Despite decades of research and policy affirming inclusion as both a moral and developmental imperative, national data show that as recently as 2022, 42% of preschoolers with disabilities received services in separate settings (U.S. ED & HHS, 2023). This pattern, largely unchanged since the 1980s, signals a deep systemic issue rather than a temporary implementation gap.

This gap between the current and the ideal state represents a persistent, contextualized, and specific PoP (CPED, n.d.; Leach et al., 2021). The problem is persistent in its endurance across policy eras; contextualized within mixed-delivery early learning systems that vary widely in funding, governance, and standards; and specific to educators' daily decisions about which children are deemed "ready" to participate in general education classrooms (McCabe et al., 2020). Within the ecological framework guiding this inquiry, these dynamics manifest across system levels. At the macrosystem level, national ideologies emphasizing meritocracy and individual performance shape societal notions of who "belongs" in educational spaces. At the exosystem level, administrative interpretations of funding formulas and credentialing requirements determine whether non-LEA providers can sustain inclusive classrooms. At the microsystem level, teacher expectations and daily interactions determine whether a child participates meaningfully with peers or remains on the margins. Each level reinforces the other, producing what Bronfenbrenner (1977) termed reciprocal influence—a self-sustaining loop of belief and practice that resists change.

Addressing this problem has profound implications. Meaningful inclusion in EC is not merely a policy goal but a fundamental human right that lays the foundation for inclusion across the lifespan (U.S. ED & HHS, 2023), leading to improved postsecondary

outcomes, including graduating with a high school diploma and enrolling in postsecondary education or a training program (U.S. ED, OSERS & OESE, 2025). Inclusive preschool settings improve cognitive, social-emotional, and academic outcomes for all children and foster a sense of belonging for children with disabilities (U.S. ED & HHS, 2023). Exclusion, by contrast, reinforces marginalization, delays intervention, and narrows developmental opportunities (National Council on Disability [NCD], 2018; UNICEF 2024).

This problem matters to children with disabilities, whose access to quality learning and peer relationships is constrained (Elbaum et al., 2024; Watson & Newman 2023); families, who must navigate complex, often inequitable systems to advocate for inclusion (Rudrabhatla et al., 2024; Lalvani et al., 2023); educators, who are expected to implement inclusive practices but may lack training or systemic support (Kondo et al., 2023; Chadwell et al., 2020); policymakers and leaders, who are accountable for equity mandates but often struggle to translate policies into sustainable practice (Balikci et al., 2025; Steed et al., 2023).

While children's needs vary in scope and intensity, this capstone intentionally does not analyze inclusion through the lens of severity or intensity of need. This decision reflects an effort to focus on the systemic and cultural conditions that shape access rather than to categorize children by disability. To disaggregate inclusion by disability risks reinforcing deficit-oriented assumptions and distraction from the environmental and attitudinal barriers that affect all learners. Consistent with IDEA and its LRE mandate, this capstone instead examines how beliefs, structures, and policies influence the continuum of services available to young children ages 3–4 in preschool settings—acknowledging that inclusion may take different forms for infants, toddlers, and primary-grade students. For example, nearly 90% of children from birth through age two

receive EI services in the home (OSEP, 2024) exemplifying the family-centered foundation of EI, where the home serves as the primary context for supporting developmental outcomes within natural routines and relationships.

The emphasis on the preschool years reflects the developmental period in which attitudes toward diversity, difference, and belonging begin to take shape, and when early inclusive experiences have the greatest potential to transform life trajectories. Embedded in this focus is the conviction, affirmed by Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, that “every child has the right to... engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child” (UNICEF, 1989/2024). Play is not only a developmental necessity but also a universal expression of participation and belonging through which inclusion becomes a vehicle for equity and lived experience (International Play Association [IPA], 2023). Thus, “All kids can play” serves as both a guiding principle and a unifying metaphor for this capstone: the belief that every child, regardless of ability, is entitled to equitable opportunities for joy, learning, and participation within EC environments.

Accordingly, this capstone investigates the historical and systemic forces that have sustained exclusionary practices in early childhood education, the influence of mindsets on the realization of inclusion, and the evidence-based strategies most likely to foster a durable culture of belonging across ECE systems. These lines of inquiry are reflected in the following research questions:

1. What historical and systemic forces sustain exclusionary practices?
2. How does mindset (e.g., attitudes and beliefs) influence inclusion in ECE?
3. What evidence-based strategies foster a durable culture of inclusion?

By situating these questions within an ecological and problem of practice framework, this study positions the persistent exclusion of preschoolers with disabilities not simply as a compliance challenge but as a culture-of-practice problem, one requiring both systemic understanding and mindset transformation to close the gap between America's inclusive ideals and its early-learning realities.

Section 2

Methodology

Search Strategy

This study used a multistage literature search to examine how inclusion is understood and implemented in American ECE. A combination of exploratory web searches, Artificial Intelligence (AI) assisted queries, traditional database searches, and manual verification was employed to remain current and comprehensive while ensuring that no single tool dictated the scope of evidence. Broad Google searches first mapped the landscape of inclusion and surfaced gray literature from federal and state agencies. Although not peer-reviewed, these materials provided context on legal mandates, prevailing terminology, and institutional practices and informed subsequent academic searches. The official White House site was consulted throughout Spring 2025 to reflect federal directives affecting inclusion.

AI-Integrated Search & Synthesis

To assist with discovery, conceptual synthesis, and verification, I used OpenAI's Deep Research (o3) and ChatGPT (GPT-4/5) under human supervision (Feb–Oct 2025). Deep Research conducted iterative, parallel keyword/semantic queries across academic indexes, open web, and gray repositories; ChatGPT served as a reflective and analytic partner for refining search logic, verifying citations, summarizing studies, and improving clarity. Consistent with emerging guidance for AI-integrated scholarship (Jae et al., 2025; Jesudason et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025; e.g., Chen & Feng, 2024), all AI outputs were manually verified through the University of Maryland Library System, Google Scholar, and original source documents prior to inclusion. The tools functioned as cognitive scaffolds, not autonomous authors.

Rather than a linear PRISMA funnel, the process behaved dynamically—more like a spiral—in which successive passes refined vocabulary and revealed intersections among culture, policy, and inclusion.

Search Passes & Retrievals

Six AI-assisted passes targeted distinct concepts—culture, history, sustainability/leadership, beliefs, ableism, and measurement—generating 625 initial records across ERIC, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Education Source, federal gray literature, and AI-indexed repositories (Table 1. Iterative AI-Assisted Passes).

Table 1

Iterative AI-Assisted Passes

Screenshot topic (pass)	Time-stamped banner	Sources surfaced	AI searches executed
Cultural influences	“Research completed in 9 m · 25 sources · 88 searches”	25	88
Historical & systemic	9 m · 26 sources · 74 searches	26	74
Sustainable culture / leadership	7 m · 29 sources · 142 searches	29	142
Transforming beliefs	6 m · 27 sources · 121 searches	27	121
Ableism vs. ideals	8 m · 23 sources · 109 searches	23	109
Measurement tools	7 m · 30 sources · 91 searches	30	91
Total (initial retrievals)	—	160	625

Screening & Study Selection

After automated and manual deduplication, 447 records remained. Title/abstract screening excluded 312 off-topic or non-empirical items. Of 135 full texts assessed for eligibility, 52 did not meet inclusion criteria, leaving 83 studies retained for synthesis (Table 2. Screening Outcomes).

Table 2

Screening Outcomes

Stage	Records (n)
Initial records retrieved (AI + databases + grey)	625
After automated & manual de-duplication	447
Title/abstract screened out (off-topic, non-empirical)	312
Full texts assessed for eligibility	135
Excluded at full text (did not meet criteria)	52
Studies retained for synthesis	83

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion: (a) 2014–2024 publication years; (b) U.S. ECE samples (ages 0–5); (c) empirical data addressing any “iceberg layer” of inclusion (structure, practice, participation/belonging, attitudes/beliefs); (d) English; and (e) full-text availability.

Exclusion: K–12-only samples, strictly medical early intervention studies, non-empirical work, non-U.S. studies (except as noted below), and duplicates.

Because Deep Research re-runs related queries as new terms/citations are added, results expand over time. To maintain auditability, counts were snapshot on March 27,

2025 (reported in Table 2) while acknowledging subsequent iterations may surface additional studies.

Use of Non-U.S. Studies

While the corpus emphasized U.S. empirical studies of children ages 0–5, a small number of rigorous non-U.S. works were included for method transfer and macrosystem context (e.g., cross-national/historical analyses; child-led methods such as photo tours, draw-and-talk, and photo-elicited interviews). These studies were used not for prevalence estimates or normative claims about U.S. systems but to import portable procedures and constructs (e.g., what children value in inclusive environments) and to triangulate with U.S. evidence at micro- and exosystem levels.

Limitations

Deep Research cannot access subscription-based/paywalled journals, so influential ECSE studies may be missing (Jesudason et al., 2025). AI systems can produce incomplete syntheses or citation inaccuracies (Xu et al., 2025); all sources were manually verified, yet residual risk remains. Reverse-bibliography approaches can privilege established voices; Google Scholar's opaque ranking by Germany-based location may have affected visibility of U.S. content. Finally, while ChatGPT supported reflection and coherence checks, model outputs reflect training data and can reproduce dominant paradigms; insights were therefore cross-validated against peer-reviewed sources and practitioner frameworks. Recent evaluations (Haman & Školník, 2025) suggest progressive reliability of AI tools but also underscore the need for cautious, supervised use.

Trustworthiness & Validity

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation (AI-assisted queries, institutional databases, gray literature, reverse citation tracing) so no single tool determined scope. Transparency was supported via documented inclusion/exclusion criteria and time-stamped retrieval counts. Manual verification included citation checks, full-text retrieval, and publication confirmation. Conceptual coherence was reviewed through faculty advisement, ensuring the analysis balances technological innovation with traditional scholarly rigor.

Theme 1: Historical and Policy Forces Shaping Inclusion Systems

This theme examines how historical ideologies, federal policies, and state administrative systems have collectively shaped the evolution of educational inclusion.

Historical Context

Debè et al. (2024) examine how eugenic ideologies shaped the identification and assessment of children with cognitive impairments and learning disabilities in Germany, Italy, and the United States. Using a qualitative, historical, and international-comparative design, the authors analyze documentary sources and secondary literature to trace how assessment procedures evolved before and after the rise of eugenics in each country. Their approach is first situating each country in its socio-political context and then detailing shifts in procedures, followed by a cross-national synthesis. The study demonstrates that eugenics functioned not as a neutral scientific paradigm but as a social program aimed at managing “degeneracy,” particularly targeting children deemed “feble-minded”.

Across all three countries the authors identify a shared “meta-story”: expansion of special-education institutions, professionalization at the pedagogy–psychology

interface, and the use of assessment to sort those who “fell through the cracks.” The degree of standardization varied: high in the US (psychometrics), mixed in Italy (tests + clinical judgment), and lowest in Germany (special-teacher authority). Paradoxically, eugenics’ scientific claim coincided with more subjective assessment regimes, even as placement decisions carried escalating, life altering consequences.

This synthesis is valuable for reframing special-needs assessment as historically co-produced by eugenic ideology, professional agendas, and state capacity, rather than as a purely technical evolution. Its most consequential insight is that assessment became a gatekeeping technology whose “objectivity” was often asserted more than achieved, with subjectivity and bias entering at different points (choice of tests, professional dominance, behavioral ratings). Contemporary implications include situating current reforms within a long arc where labels and procedures have repeatedly shifted while sorting functions persist. The authors argue that the legacy of eugenics persists in the very structure of special education systems and call for further research to explore how assessment continues to reproduce inequities across national contexts.

Debè et al. (2024) acknowledge several limitations. Their comparison is partial rather than comprehensive, focusing on selected features rather than an exhaustive national account. Isolating the specific influence of eugenics is difficult, since other social and political forces, such as mass schooling, labor market demands, and professional rivalries, were also at play. The study relies primarily on secondary sources rather than original archival data, limiting detail on local practices and lived experiences. Furthermore, cross-country contrasts in terminology, standardization, and legal frameworks complicate direct comparison.

Policy Context

In 2018 the National Council on Disability (NCD) published *The Segregation of Students with Disabilities* as part of its IDEA policy series, to examine the persistence of restrictive placements for children with disabilities. Despite the statutory guarantee of the LRE under IDEA, the report found that many students, particularly those with intellectual and multiple disabilities, autism and students of color, continue to be disproportionately educated in self-contained classrooms or separate schools. The Council emphasized that placement decisions often reflect factors such as geography, race, and deficit-based beliefs about disability rather than the individualized needs of students as outlined by federal law.

Employing a mixed-methods research design, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with parents, educators, attorneys, and advocates; four regional forums held in California, Illinois, Texas, and Virginia; and a national forum at the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA) conference. Additional perspectives were collected through an online forum and follow-up interviews with families and educators. Policy and legal analysis included review of federal statutes, regulations, Dear Colleague Letters, state-level guidance, and case law such as *PARC v. Pennsylvania* and *Oberti v. Clementon*, which have shaped interpretations of LRE. Quantitative data were derived from placement reports (EDFacts), comparing national and state-level placement patterns across disability categories and racial groups from 2005–2006 to 2015–2016.

The NCD (2018) findings revealed stark disparities. Some states, such as Vermont and Alabama, educate the majority of students with disabilities alongside their peers, while others, including New Jersey, Hawaii, and California, maintain high rates of segregation. Students with intellectual and multiple disabilities were consistently the

least likely to be included, with fewer than 20% spending most of the day in general education. Disproportionality by race was also evident, with Black and Hispanic students more likely than White peers to be placed in restrictive environments. Despite IDEA's requirements, the U.S. ED often declared states in compliance even when data showed little progress toward inclusion. Research evidence summarized in the report affirmed that inclusive placements produce stronger academic, social, and postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities, while segregated settings provide less rigorous instruction and fewer opportunities to learn. The report also highlighted systemic barriers such as the traditional continuum of placements, organizational inertia, and limited workforce capacity, while noting the effectiveness of evidence-based practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), cooperative learning, and culturally responsive teaching.

The report acknowledged several limitations. The qualitative findings, based on participants recruited through COPAA and advocacy networks, cannot be generalized to all families or educators and instead provide illustrative perspectives. Similarly, the quantitative data rely on local IEP team interpretations of "removal" from general education, which may not fully align with federal intent. Nevertheless, these measures represent comprehensive nationally available data on inclusion and segregation.

Overall, the 2018 NCD report shows that federal aspirations for inclusive education remain largely unmet. Weak enforcement of IDEA, coupled with entrenched deficit-oriented thinking and systemic inequities tied to race and disability category, has allowed segregation to persist. The Council calls for Congress to fully fund IDEA, for the Department of Education to engage in more aggressive enforcement of LRE requirements, and for states to adopt systemic reforms to expand inclusive practices.

The National Center for Education Evaluation’s (NCEE, 2020) report on Preschool Special Education Services and Educators provides a cross-sectional overview of how states and districts delivered Part B, Section 619 services during the 2014–2015 school year. Although the study does not test causal relationships, it offers a valuable baseline for understanding inclusion practices in early childhood special education. Two coordinated surveys—a census of all 51 state Section 619 coordinators and a nationally representative district survey—were combined with EDFacts and Common Core of Data to generate weighted national estimates. Because data were self-reported and reflect 2014–2015 conditions, findings may not capture subsequent changes.

Inclusion-Focused Findings

Access to inclusive classrooms: About two-thirds of districts (68 %) reported at least one inclusive classroom, but only half of children with disabilities received most of their services in inclusive settings. Typical classes included seven children with disabilities and fourteen without.

Program structure and service models: Nearly half of districts offered only halfday preschool, with services primarily delivered in district schools by district staff. Pull-out services (78 %) were far more common than co-teaching (35 %), reflecting persistent segregation in service delivery.

Curricula and interventions: About half of districts reported using a single core curriculum—most often The Creative Curriculum. Widely used interventions such as behavior support plans (77 %), Social Stories (68 %), and PECS (70 %) were not always evidence-based.

Teacher qualifications and professional development: Most districts required a bachelor’s degree and early childhood credentials, and 95–96 % of teachers and paraprofessionals were rated “highly qualified.” However, professional development

(PD) opportunities were inconsistent: only one-third of districts offered PD at least every other month, typically for 3–5 hours per session.

Eligibility and demographics: Forty-three states used quantitative criteria to determine developmental delay; the most common eligibility categories were speech/language impairment (43 %) and developmental delay (38 %). Children served were predominantly male (70 %) and White (54 %), while Black (14 %) and Hispanic (23 %) children were overrepresented in restrictive placements.

The 2020 NCEE report highlights that funding and workforce capacity are pivotal in shaping service quality and inclusion. Nearly 80 % of districts cited funding or cost as the main barrier to adopting or sustaining new curricula and interventions, while 62 % identified insufficient time for professional development as a limiting factor. Although the workforce was well-credentialed, limited fiscal resources and time undermined the consistent implementation of inclusive, evidence-based practices. These constraints explain the ongoing predominance of pull-out models and uneven use of interventions across districts. In short, inclusion quality is structurally mediated by the availability of sustained funding and educator support.

Strengthening IDEA 619 implementation therefore requires targeted investment in professional learning, staffing stability, and instructional resources to ensure inclusion is both accessible and effective.

McCabe et al. (2020) critically analyze how the IDEA (2004) mandate for education in the LRE, has shaped and in many ways constrained the inclusion of students with significant support needs (SSN). The authors argue that the way schools and IEP teams interpret and operationalize LRE reflects longstanding policy tensions that reproduce segregation rather than dismantle it.

The study situates LRE within the historical policy continuum of placements, a concept introduced in federal legislation beginning with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). Initially considered progressive, the continuum (ranging from general education classrooms to residential institutions) inadvertently encoded a hierarchy of placement, mixing specialized services with restrictive settings. The authors cite others who've warned that this policy structure enables schools to treat general education access as conditional, something students must "earn" through compliance or performance, rather than a right supported by supplementary aids and services.

Methodologically, the McCabe et al. (2020) used a critical qualitative approach within a geography framework. They examined 13 LRE statements drawn from 88 IEPs across six states, coding justifications through the spatial concepts of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia. This analysis revealed three categories of placement: conditional, closed, and open. Conditional placements allowed limited access to general education "when appropriate," closed placements excluded students almost entirely, and open placements provided explicit commitments to general education with supports. These findings expose how policy language permits discretionary interpretations that sustain inequitable access.

Findings highlight that IEP teams frequently rely on ambiguous terminology, deficit-based rationales, and behavioral norms to justify more restrictive placements. This practice aligns with a broader pattern in federal policy where the LRE principle is often treated as a place rather than a service model, a misinterpretation that scholars have linked to the persistence of segregated education for students with significant disabilities (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016; Ryndak et al., 2014). Even though federal law emphasizes supplementary aids and services, the continuum framework continues to

reinforce the assumption that more intensive support must occur outside general education, thereby creating “special education heterotopias” or illusory spaces of inclusion that in practice sustain exclusion.

McCabe et al. (2020) identify key limitations in both policy and their study. Policy-wise, IDEA provides no standardized definition of LRE, leaving interpretation to local discretion and creating wide variability in practice across states and districts. This lack of clarity sustains inequities despite legislative intent. Study-wise, the authors acknowledge that analyzing IEP documents alone cannot capture the full deliberative process of placement decision-making. They recommend future research that incorporates interviews, observations, and broader regional comparisons to explore how local contexts and policies shape LRE decisions.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) Research Report Series (DeBruin-Parecki & Slutzky, 2016) examines pre-K age 4 learning standards across U.S. states and territories. Using a mixed-methods, multi-source design conducted between 2014 and 2015, the study included (a) an online survey of early childhood leaders from 53 of 56 states and territories (95% response rate), primarily focused on literacy standards; (b) five geographically diverse focus groups (n = 21) in New Jersey, Illinois, California, Virginia, and Georgia; (c) 25 semi-structured interviews with survey participants; and (d) document analysis of 54 publicly available pre-K standards. Quantitative data were analyzed through frequency and state-level summaries, while qualitative data from open-ended survey responses, interviews, and focus groups were coded using NVivo through an iterative comparative approach. Although the report centers on the purposes, history, and development of standards, it also highlights how those standards—and their omissions—address diverse learners, particularly children with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs).

Analysis of the 54 standards documents revealed major gaps in inclusion supports. Only 11 states included both ELL-specific indicators and teaching strategies; 4 states provided indicators only, and 9 provided strategies only. The remaining 30 documents contained no ELL-specific supports. Provisions for children with special needs were even more limited: just one state included both indicators and strategies, two included indicators only, and 10 provided strategies only. More than half of all state documents contained no separate guidance for special education populations.

Across states, standards documents often included only generic language such as “modify instruction, learning centers, and activities to accommodate ELL children or children with special needs.”, providing little actionable guidance for teachers to adapt instruction for students with varied linguistic, cultural, and ability backgrounds. The report underscores that while many ELLs and children with disabilities are enrolled in preschool, accurate counts are rarely maintained, with some states and territories citing this lack of data as justification for not including specific learning indicators for these populations.

While comprehensive, the ETS study is descriptive and relies heavily on self-report data from policy administrators and document reviews. It does not test causal links between standards content and classroom practice or child outcomes. Because the focus is on administrative perspectives rather than classroom implementation, findings may overrepresent policy intentions and understate practical challenges. Furthermore, the analysis identifies the presence—but not the quality—of inclusion indicators, and differences in unpublished state alignment processes limit comparability across jurisdictions.

Despite these constraints, the report provides a credible national map of the early childhood policy landscape. It concludes that inclusion remains largely rhetorical within

state standards and calls for stronger, research-based frameworks that explicitly integrate indicators and strategies for ELLs and children with disabilities. Policy recommendations emphasize developing empirically grounded domain content, standardizing organization and terminology, aligning beyond English language arts and mathematics, expanding professional development, and embedding explicit inclusion guidance to promote coherence and equity across the birth to–grade 3 continuum.

Current Context

On April 23, 2025, President Trump signed the Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy Executive Order, declaring that the policy of the U.S. should emphasize “equality of opportunity” rather than “equality of outcomes” and pursue a “merit-based,” “color-blind society” (White House, 2025). The order directed all federal agencies to deprioritize enforcement of disparate-impact liability, review and amend existing regulations imposing disparate-impact standards (e.g., under Title VI, Title VII, and the Fair Housing Act), and reassess pending investigations and litigation relying on disparate-impact theory (Executive Office of the President, 2025a).

Disparate-impact liability refers to a civil rights doctrine under which a policy or practice, although facially neutral, produces disproportionate harm to a protected group (e.g., on the basis of race, sex, age, or disability) and cannot be justified by legitimate necessity. In essence, it is not the intent to discriminate but the effect that triggers liability (Green, 2025). By signaling an intent to eliminate such obligations “in all contexts to the maximum degree possible,” the order effectively curtails the federal government’s capacity to require that neutral policies be justified by their disparate outcomes.

In education and disability inclusion, this shift may weaken enforcement of long-standing protections that require modification of exclusionary practices, such as

disciplinary policies or eligibility criteria, that disproportionately disadvantage children with disabilities or children of color. For example, a publicly funded preschool that requires children to be fully toilet-trained before enrollment may appear neutral but may disproportionately exclude children with disabilities that affect toileting (e.g., developmental delays, cerebral palsy). Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA, such a requirement could trigger disparate-impact liability unless the school can prove it is essential to the program and no reasonable modification is possible. Legal precedent confirms that such “readiness” requirements that systematically exclude children with disabilities have been found by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to violate Section 504 and the ADA (“The Rights of Students with Disabilities Under the IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA,” 2025).

Another salient example: a preschool uses a zero-tolerance rule for aggressive behavior, resulting in frequent suspensions or expulsions of children with disabilities or children of color. Even though the policy is race-neutral and disability-neutral, its effects may show disparate impact. To this point, the U.S. ED and HHS (2014, reaffirmed 2023) issued joint guidance stating that discipline policies that disproportionately impact children with disabilities or certain racial groups may violate Title VI and Section 504, unless justified by legitimate educational necessity and no less-discriminatory alternatives exist. The executive order thus represents a turning point: it redirects federal oversight from an effects-based to an intent-based framework, raising fundamental questions about how inclusion and equity will be safeguarded under this reframing of civil rights enforcement.

Earlier that spring, on January 20, 2025, President Trump issued a presidential directive ordering the “termination of all DEI and DEIA mandates, policies, programs, preferences, and activities in the Federal Government,” including “equity action plans,”

“equity-related grants or contracts,” and all DEI or DEIA performance requirements for employees, contractors, or grantees (White House, 2025). Legal and administrative turbulence quickly followed, as these events reflected not only a rhetorical departure from inclusion but also a material retraction of resources.

On March 20, 2025, the administration issued another sweeping reform through the Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities Executive Order. This order directed the Secretary of Education to facilitate the closure of the U.S. Department of Education and return authority over education to states and local communities, while maintaining continuity in existing programs and services (White House, 2025b). It framed this shift as a corrective response to what it characterized as the failures of centralized federal education control, asserting that the existing bureaucracy had failed students and families.

By April 2025, K–12 districts were required to certify that federal funds were not being used for “discriminatory DEI” programming in order to retain funding (Associated Press, 2025). Federal courts responded by issuing temporary injunctions, creating widespread uncertainty across education systems (Politico, 2025).

The financial and programmatic impact was immediate in the early childhood landscape. Between January and April 2025, the Trump administration withheld Head Start funds in a manner that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) later ruled violated the Impoundment Control Act (GAO, 2025). The interruption exposed the vulnerability of federal supports for low-income and young children during a period when Head Start’s future was under congressional review (von Hippel, Chor, & Lurie, 2025; Time Magazine, 2025).

Warnings from education leaders amplified these concerns. In a January 29, 2025, blog post, Pudelski, Director of Advocacy for the American Association of School

Administrators (AASA), cautioned that school policies referencing “white privilege,” “unconscious bias,” or “affirmative action” would likely face scrutiny under new federal enforcement priorities (Pudelski, 2025). Such guidance underscores how the administration’s anti-DEI directives have begun to reshape agency interpretation of civil rights laws and compliance expectations for schools and districts.

Amid an ongoing government shutdown, on October 14, 2025, the Trump administration announced sweeping layoffs that effectively dismantled the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) (Turner, 2025). The reduction-in-force eliminated most staff overseeing \$15 billion in federal special education funding and ensuring states’ compliance with the IDEA. Current and former employees warned that the move leaves no federal oversight to guarantee services for 7.5 million children with disabilities, potentially placing the government itself in violation of federal disability law. Critics view the cuts as part of the administration’s broader effort to return education authority to the states, raising concerns about equity, accountability, and the future of IDEA enforcement. Proponents argue that the Reduction in Force (RIF) is necessary to downsize the federal government and empower states and local districts to manage education funding and programs more effectively (Turner, 2025).

Collectively, these developments have generated a landscape of legal, fiscal, and operational instability across early childhood and K–12 systems. While peer-reviewed analyses of these immediate effects remain limited, existing scholarship provides critical insight into the conditions necessary for inclusion and the ways in which recent policy shifts risk undermining them.

Discussion

Across a century of educational reform, the historical and policy evidence converge on a single continuity: the language of inclusion has evolved, but the logic of exclusion remains. The eugenic legacy of classification and “scientific sorting” described by Debè et al. (2024) persists in contemporary practices that continue to categorize children according to perceived ability and developmental difference. These practices, now codified through administrative processes and eligibility criteria IDEA, reproduce the hierarchical placement structures originally intended to segregate rather than to integrate. The continuum of placements, often interpreted as a ladder of readiness, reflects enduring assumptions that proximity to typical development determines a child’s educational worth. Analyses of the LRE further show how policy language, particularly the continuum model, encodes hierarchies of placement that normalize exclusion under the guise of individualization. This historical through-line is further evident in the current policy landscape, where recent federal actions have shifted emphasis from equity of outcomes to equality of opportunity. In effect, the nation’s policy trajectory mirrors its historical pattern.

Yet, this continuity exists alongside an increasing awareness within the system itself. Federal and professional bodies have explicitly acknowledged that inclusion must extend beyond access to encompass participation and belonging as defining features of quality (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; U.S. ED & HHS, 2023), signaling a collective recognition within the field that the work of inclusion is cultural as well as structural (OSERS & OESE, 2025).

In this sense, the nation’s policy trajectory reflects both progress and paradox, a growing professional consensus around the moral and developmental imperatives of inclusion, coexisting with macro-level policies that constrain its realization. Recognizing

this duality, affirms that the field is moving in the right direction yet reminds us that realizing the full promise of inclusion will require sustained cultural transformation, not only improved regulation.

Theme 2: Ecosystems as Drivers of Practice

While the enduring legacies of policy and ideology demonstrate how exclusion has been structurally and historically reinforced, the lived expression of those forces unfolds within the nested systems that shape children's everyday experiences. This theme therefore shifts from a historical and policy lens to an ecological one, examining how interactions across multiple levels—from social media's pervasive presence, to federal guidance and community structures, to classroom culture—collectively influence opportunities for access, participation, and belonging in ECE settings.

Social Media as a Macrosystem Lever

In the twenty-first century, social media has emerged as one of the most powerful macrosystem levers acting on cultural attitudes and ideals. Two recent developments illustrate this macrosystemic reach. First, ubiquity: as of 2024, 83 % of U.S. adults use at least one social media platform, with YouTube (83 %) and Facebook (68 %) leading, followed by Instagram (47 %) and TikTok (33 %) (Pew Research Center, 2024). According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in February 2025 (Park, 2025), nearly half of U.S. adult social media users say social media is very or somewhat important for them when it comes to finding others who share their views about important issues. Second, consequence: empirical evidence shows that representation on social media shapes cultural beliefs about disability and inclusion. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok now mediate how families, educators, and the public encounter disability narratives (Barroso-Moreno et al., 2024). Rather than

merely mirroring pre-existing attitudes, social media actively amplifies, normalizes, and routinizes those attitudes through algorithmic circulation, influencing the expectations that cascade into exosystem institutions and microsystem classrooms (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Barroso-Moreno et al. (2024) examined how social media platforms shape public discourse on disability and inclusive education by identifying the dominant themes, social actors, and narrative functions across three major networks—Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (now X). The authors sought to determine whether these platforms foster inclusive narratives aligned with the social model of disability or perpetuate exclusionary and politicized discourses. Using big-data and content-analysis methods, the authors analyzed more than 100,000 posts across Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter X between 2021 and 2022. Their mixed-methods design combined sentiment analysis, web scraping, and qualitative coding of the 100 most viral posts per platform. From this corpus, the 100 most viral posts per platform (based on “likes”) were selected for detailed content analysis, resulting in a final analytic sample of 300 posts.

Findings revealed distinct “thematic specializations”. Instagram was dominated by advocacy and awareness-raising posts (42%) and advice/guidance (29%), primarily authored by digital creators, doctors, and educators. These posts promoted positive attitudes toward disability, shared intervention tips, and employed hashtags such as #inclusion and #disabilityawareness. YouTube displayed the greatest thematic diversity, emphasizing identity narratives (25%), educational/training content (19%), and inclusive projects (17%). Content creators and users with disabilities shared personal stories, “day-in-the-life” videos, and examples of inclusive practices in schools and communities. Despite comprising only 6% of the sample, advice and guidance videos achieved the highest engagement (27.8% of total likes), suggesting that practical, empowering content

resonates most strongly with audiences. Twitter X was overwhelmingly political in tone, with 68% of posts focusing on partisan debate, electioneering (campaigning to influence the result of an election), or policy discussion. While some posts denounced exclusionary measures or celebrated inclusion policies, others employed “empty discourse” rhetorical slogans devoid of actionable content. Politicians and political parties were the main contributors (43% of posts), often instrumentalizing disability-related issues for ideological purposes. While digital creators and professionals (e.g., doctors, educators, journalists) shape much of the discourse, activists and people with disabilities themselves remain underrepresented, particularly in political conversations.

Barroso-Moreno et al. (2024) identified several limitations: The analysis was text-based; it did not include the multimodal elements (e.g., images, video narratives, or audio cues) that are central to understanding social media discourse, Twitter’s API allows for broader textual scraping, whereas Instagram and YouTube rely on web scraping, possibly influencing post visibility, Data reflect a one-year period (2021–2022), during which political and cultural events could have skewed engagement trends, As a Big Data study, findings describe macro-level patterns rather than causal relationships or user motivations. The authors also warn, that algorithmic amplification privileges highly emotional or polarizing content, risking the simplification of complex disability experiences. Nevertheless, this study offers a comprehensive comparative analyses of how inclusive education and disability are framed across major social media platforms. Barroso-Moreno et al. (2024) underscore the need for inclusive digital citizenship and critical media literacy initiatives that empower people with disabilities to participate actively and authentically in online spaces, to ensure that social media serves as a vehicle for equity rather than exclusion.

Steiner-Hofbauer et al. (2025) examined how autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and neurodiversity are represented on TikTok—currently one of the most influential platforms shaping public perceptions of mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions. The authors analyzed differences in video content, creator identity, and the representation of autistic individuals to understand whether TikTok reinforces stereotypes or contributes to more inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming narratives. The researchers grounded their analysis in the growing tension between the medical model of disability (focused on deficits and treatment) and the neurodiversity paradigm, which frames autism as a natural variation of human cognition rather than a disorder to be “cured.” The final dataset contained 100 videos— the 50 most-viewed videos under the hashtag #autism, and the 50 most-viewed videos tagged with both #autism and #neurodiversity— totaling approximately 764.7 million views and 123 million likes, with 97% of total views attributed to the #autism videos alone. Only text and visual observation were used; audio cues, captions, and comment interactions were not fully analyzed.

The study revealed a clear divergence between entertainment-driven and advocacy-oriented representations of autism on TikTok: #Autism videos dominated total engagement with 738.1 million views compared to only 26.6 million views for the #neurodiversity sample. With far greater reach these videos tended to trivialize or stereotype autistic behavior, often portraying children humorously or emphasizing deficits. This mirrors broader trends in traditional media that infantilize autism and underrepresent adults. #Neurodiversity videos though less viral, offered more accurate, inclusive portrayals, frequently led by autistic creators and healthcare professionals. These clips contextualized symptoms, promoted acceptance, and aligned more closely with the neurodiversity paradigm.

The analysis was limited to TikTok, excluding other social networks where autism advocacy may differ (e.g., YouTube, Instagram), and although 100 top-viewed videos captured trending content, this sample is small relative to TikTok's overall volume as viral content changes rapidly, so findings reflect a snapshot in mid-2023 rather than sustained trends. Steiner-Hofbauer et al. (2025) warn that the low visibility of educational content may amplify misinformation and stigma. The findings show that while #autism videos dominate in popularity, they often reinforce stereotypes. Conversely #neurodiversity videos though less visible, promote inclusion. Basically, viewers relying on TikTok for autism information are more likely to encounter entertainment-based, decontextualized portrayals than evidence-based education. Furthermore, both samples overwhelmingly featured white creators, underscoring a lack of racial diversity and inclusion in neurodiversity advocacy on social media. The authors emphasize that healthcare professionals and educators must recognize TikTok's influence on public perceptions of autism and advocate for responsible, evidence-based digital communication.

Similarly, Bellon-Harn et al. (2020) assessed how children's speech and language disorders are portrayed on YouTube by examining the source and type of informational content shared; the understandability and actionability of videos using the Patient Education Materials Assessment Tool for Audiovisual Materials (PEMAT-AV); and whether professional versus non-professional videos differed in quality and viewer engagement metrics (e.g., views, likes). The authors identified the 100 most-viewed English-language YouTube videos about childhood speech and language disorder (S/LDs) using a combination of parent- and professional-generated search terms such as "speech delay," "expressive language disorder," and "child language disorder." Searches were conducted in private browser mode to minimize algorithmic bias. A

multidisciplinary panel—including two speech-language pathologists, nine parents of children with S/LDs, and three early childhood teachers—contributed to refining the search process. Raters included two graduate students in speech-language pathology and one faculty researcher. Inter-rater reliability was high.

Of the 100 videos analyzed, 58 were uploaded by professionals, 24 by consumers, and 18 by Internet-based sources such as online media outlets. Collectively, these videos had over 4.1 million views. Although professional videos were more numerous, consumer-created videos tended to receive higher engagement (more “likes” and comments), reflecting a preference for personal narratives among viewers. Internet-based videos were shorter but less engaging overall. The majority of videos (56%) focused on signs and symptoms and treatment of S/LDs (54%), while only 13% discussed diagnosis and fewer than 5% addressed policy, services, or research. Professional videos were more likely to include causes and treatment explanations, whereas consumer videos rarely covered etiology or evidence-based approaches. Average understandability was 68%, close to but below the adequacy threshold (70%). Average actionability was 32%, indicating poor clarity about what actions viewers should take. Professional videos scored significantly higher in understandability than consumer videos, but there were no differences in actionability across source types. The most understandable videos used clear audio, everyday language, and active voice, while shortcomings included lack of summaries, visual aids, or explicit behavioral guidance for parents.

Bellon-Harn et al. (2020) concluded that although YouTube offers a wide range of content about children’s speech and language disorders, the majority of videos—especially those by consumers—lack sufficient clarity and fail to guide viewers toward actionable steps. This finding mirrors trends in related studies on autism and tinnitus, where emotional storytelling attracts viewership but professional guidance is limited.

Families may prefer relatable personal experiences over clinical information, but this preference increases the risk of misinformation or incomplete understanding. The authors emphasized the need for professionally produced evidence-based videos that combine high understandability with practical, actionable guidance for caregivers and teachers.

Cultural Logics in the Macrosystem

Preschool in Three Cultures (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) and Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009) are comparative ethnographies of EC classrooms in Japan, China, and the U.S. Both use video-cued multivocal ethnography where researchers film “typical days” in preschools and then screen selected scenes to teachers, directors, and experts; the stakeholders’ commentaries, about the videos serve as the primary data.

The original (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) demonstrated, “preschools are where young Japanese children become Japanese, young Chinese children become Chinese, and young American children become American... key sites for the continuation and transmission of culture.” Building on this foundation, Tobin (2010) argues that policymaking in ECE should recognize the sociocultural factors that inevitably shape it, even when policymakers do not consciously acknowledge them. Tobin & Hayashi’s 2011 analysis of the Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited study revealed how globalization and modernization pressures have created both continuity and change: Chinese preschools shifted toward play-based, child-initiated learning; Japanese preschools emphasized empathy and practices such as *mimamoru* (watching and waiting); and U.S. preschools highlighted the cultural ideal of individual choice.

Tobin and Hayashi (2011) further elaborated on these dynamics by detailing the methodological innovation of video-cued multivocal ethnography, which allowed

teachers and educators to articulate implicit cultural logics not captured in policy documents. Their findings reinforced that while preschools must adapt to demographic and political changes, they remain key sites for cultural reproduction. For example, China's "Storytelling King" activity hybridized progressive pedagogies with longstanding traditions of mastery and critique, U.S. classrooms tied choice to democracy and intrinsic motivation, and Japanese teachers deployed culturally informed approaches to conflict management. Ultimately, these studies converge on the conclusion that preschools serve as both mirrors of national culture and laboratories of change, where implicit cultural beliefs sustain distinct practices even under globalization.

The samples are purposeful and small (two sites per country in 2009; a limited set of scenes), so findings are not nationally representative and cannot be linked to child outcomes. The method privileges adult commentary elicited by video (susceptible to reactivity and social desirability), relies on translation/interpretation across languages, and risks cultural essentialism if vignettes are overgeneralized. Still, by treating the commentaries themselves as data, the studies compellingly show how educators articulate and negotiate their cultural "scripts."

Van Steen and Wilson (2020) synthesize evidence on teachers' attitudes toward including students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and assess how study, sample, and national cultural factors shape those attitudes. Across 64 samples from 36 countries (1994–2019), a random-effects model yielded a medium positive mean effect, indicating that teachers are generally favorable toward inclusion. The review distinguishes cultural influences using Hofstede's six dimensions—power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence—scored 0–100 for each study's country. Demographic moderators were small or marginal: pre-service teachers trended more positive than in-service primary

teachers, and higher proportions of male participants trended less positive; disability specificity and scale type did not reliably change effects once other moderators were considered.

The review employs Hofstede's definitions: power distance (acceptance of unequal power), individualism–collectivism (independence vs. in-group embeddedness), masculinity–femininity (competition/achievement vs. care/quality of life), uncertainty avoidance (comfort with ambiguity), long-term orientation (pragmatic future orientation), and indulgence–restraint (freedom to gratify desires vs. social regulation). Countries with higher individualism tended to show more favorable teacher attitudes in the multivariable model (e.g., United Kingdom IND=89; Netherlands IND=80). Power distance & uncertainty avoidance related to less positive attitudes (in single-factor tests). For instance, Japan shows very high uncertainty avoidance (UA=92) and Saudi Arabia very high-power distance (PD=95); both dimensions, when tested alone, related to less positive attitudes. Countries scoring higher on indulgence (e.g., Australia

INDUL=71) were associated with more positive attitudes in the individual moderator models. In the full model, individualism remained the only significant cultural predictor (masculinity was marginal).

Several factors limit how fully the results can be interpreted. First, some moderator data were missing, especially cultural scores for certain countries and detailed information about participant characteristics such as teaching experience or level of training. This gap reduces the precision of cross-country comparisons. Second, there was considerable variation in how attitudes were measured across studies; researchers used different scales and constructs, which may have introduced inconsistency in what was being compared. Finally, most studies did not distinguish attitudes by type or severity of

disability, preventing a closer look at whether teachers' views differ for children with varying needs.

Van Steen and Wilson (2020) argue that interventions to strengthen inclusive attitudes should be culturally responsive, not copy-pasted across systems, and that mixed demographic effects likely operate in concert with cultural forces. For example, in more collectivist or high-power-distance contexts, educators may need explicit opportunities to reflect on hierarchical or dependency-based views of disability, whereas in highly individualistic contexts, the focus might be on fostering collaboration and shared responsibility. Ultimately, the authors emphasize that sustainable inclusion depends on cultural alignment—policies and professional development that recognize, rather than overlook, the deep-seated cultural influences shaping how teachers understand and enact inclusion.

Gunnestad et al. (2022) comparative policy analysis ask what core values ECE systems articulate in official documents and how these converge or diverge across countries. Grounded in classic value theory (e.g., Rokeach's terminal/instrumental values and Hofstede's levels of analysis), they define values as principles that guide judgments and action in ECE and use this framework to organize findings into three value groups: political/society-related, educational, and individual/relational values.

Methodologically, the team conducted document analysis with content and thematic coding of binding national texts (laws, curricula, and frameworks) from 13 countries; local ECE partners first identified and extracted value statements, after which the authors iteratively synthesized and categorized these values. The U.S. was represented through Minnesota's Early Childhood Indicators of Progress because ECE standards are state-based. The procedure emphasized official public texts and proceeded in two stages: partner-led identification/appraisal followed by cross-case thematic

analysis that yielded the three-part value typology. Findings show clear evidence of both globalization-led convergence and local divergence.

Many countries explicitly or implicitly reference international human-rights instruments and global agendas (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations), yielding common emphases on democracy, equality, respect, freedom of expression/conscience, gender equity, and environmental stewardship. At the same time, policy texts retain culturally specific priorities such as national heritage or patriotism, and (in the U.S. case) a distinctive focus on family engagement to honor community narratives, illustrating bottom-up adaptation of shared global values. The authors therefore argue that top-down influences (global norms) and bottom up processes (local reinterpretation) operate in parallel when ECE values are codified in policy.

A key contribution is the breadth of the sample and a transparent, replicable approach to policy text analysis that surfaces a structured map of ECE values useful to teacher educators and policymakers. By distinguishing political/societal, educational, and individual/relational values, and showing how some values straddle categories, the study offers a pragmatic lens for curriculum and leadership discussions. It also sharpens the debate about globalization by documenting concrete instances of convergence (rights-based and equity values) alongside local differentiation (indigenous rights, cultural pride, family engagement).

Gunnestad et al. (2022) note that convenience, like country sample recruited via professional networks, limits global representativeness, and translation dependence for several countries (e.g., Brazil, Morocco, Puerto Rico, Spain) risks nuance loss or drift in value terms. Because only public documents were analyzed, not all demographic groups' perspectives are equally represented; meanings may also be colored by national political

ideologies, and the study intentionally does not unpack each country's political-cultural context. Additionally, policy statements may not mirror practice in ECE settings, if policies are unknown or unimplemented locally, identified values remain aspirational rather than operative, pointing to a research gap on enactment.

The comparative offers a concise, theory-informed map of ECE policy values across diverse systems, showing how global rights-oriented discourses and local cultural priorities shape value frameworks, useful for aligning curricula, teacher education, and leadership with stated aims, while appropriately cautioning that broader, multilingual samples and studies of implementation are needed.

Exosystem

Administrators

Balikci, Gulboy, and Rakap (2025) conducted a systematic review of 18 studies examining EC administrators' attitudes toward inclusive education and the factors that shape these views. The studies spanned six countries, though most were U.S.-based, with qualitative methods predominating. Findings intersected around eight themes: (1) broad support for inclusion; (2) variable role perceptions (leaders vs. facilitators); (3) persistent challenges such as staffing and behavioral concerns; (4) individual and contextual factors influencing attitudes; (5) strong professional development and support needs; (6) reservations about including children with high medical or therapeutic needs; (7) alignment between administrator and teacher perspectives; and (8) advocacy for greater societal awareness and resources. Quantitative results echoed these themes, indicating generally positive views but significant gaps in training and resources, with principals often more supportive than teachers yet aware of their own capacity limitations.

Administrators across contexts generally expressed positive attitudes toward disability-related inclusion, but their readiness to implement inclusive practices was tempered by persistent challenges, including limited resources, insufficient training, and ambiguity about their leadership role. The review found that administrators' perceptions varied with individual and contextual factors such as gender, education level, experience, and school location. Importantly, administrators' attitudes often aligned with and influenced teachers' perspectives within their schools, reinforcing the leadership role in shaping inclusive cultures.

The review acknowledged several limitations: most studies did not specify disability types or focus exclusively on EC; and the methodological quality of included studies was uneven. Despite these constraints, the review makes a valuable contribution by centering on an often-overlooked group—administrators—and underscoring their influence in setting the tone for inclusive practice. The authors concluded that policy and practice should focus on administrator-specific professional development, clearer role definitions, and more reliable resource allocation to address the recurring barriers to EC inclusion.

Steed et al. (2024) qualitative phenomenological study was among those reviewed by Balikci, Gulboy, and Rakap (2025). The authors investigated preschool administrators' perspectives on inclusion, a relatively underexplored dimension of EC inclusion research. Given administrators' pivotal roles in interpreting policy, making placement decisions, and allocating resources, the study sought to understand how they define inclusion and what supports they believe are needed to implement high-quality inclusive preschool programs. The study was part of a larger mixed-methods project in collaboration with a Western U.S. state education department. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with 23 preschool administrators representing one-

third of the state's districts. Administrators had an average of 13 years in their current role and 26 years in education. Interviews averaged 35 minutes, were transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using open coding and constant comparison methods, followed by thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was enhanced through interrater reliability checks, member checking with 19 administrators, and audit trails.

Steed et al. (2024) found that administrators' definitions of inclusion revealed four themes: (a) inclusion as a right for all children, (b) inclusion as appropriate only for some children depending on severity of needs, (c) inclusion shaped by families' preferences, and (d) inclusion understood logistically in terms of ratios, funding, and space. While many endorsed full inclusion, others expressed caveats, particularly for children with significant disabilities or complex support needs. Administrators highlighted families' preferences as influential sometimes enabling, other times limiting inclusive placement. In terms of supports, two key categories needs emerged: 1) additional funding and classroom space; and 2) more personnel, professional development, and retention strategies. The study underscored that administrators often balance equity ideals with pragmatic constraints such as staffing shortages, physical space, and scheduling.

The study's scope was limited to one Western U.S. state, reducing generalizability to other regions and international contexts. The sample was also demographically narrow: most administrators were White women, mirroring the EC workforce but limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. Further, the study did not collect detailed data on administrators' prior special education training or personal experiences with disability, which might have influenced their beliefs. Lastly, as interviews occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, contextual factors may have shaped administrators' perceptions of logistical and staffing barriers. Steed et al. (2024) contribute to the

literature by highlighting how preschool administrators simultaneously endorse inclusion and grapple with constraints that produce uneven implementation. The findings stress the importance of addressing resource shortages, supporting administrators with training and professional learning communities, and attending to family engagement in shaping inclusive practices.

Teachers

Dignath et al. (2022) conducted a large-scale meta-analysis to examine teachers' beliefs about inclusive education across 102 studies from 40 countries, drawing on 191 effect sizes and a combined sample of nearly 41,000 teachers. Most data collections took place in the USA ($m = 17$), Australia ($m = 11$), and Canada ($m = 8$), and more than one-third of the studies were conducted across developing economies ($m = 37$). $k = 93$ estimates resulted from studies carried out with preschool or primary school teachers, and $k = 24$ with secondary school teachers ($k =$ number of individual statistical effects analyzed).

The authors focused on three interconnected belief components: cognitive appraisals (attitudes and evaluations), emotional appraisals (concerns or affective responses), and self-efficacy (confidence in implementing inclusive practices). On average, teachers' beliefs clustered around the midpoint of rating scales, indicating neither strong endorsement nor outright rejection of inclusion. Cognitive appraisals averaged 3.18/5, emotional appraisals 3.17/5, and self-efficacy 3.40/5. Preservice teachers reported feeling more confident in their ability to teach inclusively than in-service teachers, whereas special education teachers held more positive views about inclusion than general education teachers.

The findings also emphasized the importance of teacher preparation and professional learning. Training programs were found to strengthen all aspects of

teachers' belief systems—helping them think more positively about inclusion, feel less anxious or concerned about it, and develop greater confidence in their capacity to teach students with diverse needs. Notably, interventions that embedded field experiences in inclusive classrooms were more effective than those relying on coursework or general social contact with people with disabilities. By contrast, neither intervention length nor generic social contact predicted stronger changes in beliefs. These findings underscore that practical, authentic experiences with inclusive pedagogy are critical to shifting teacher beliefs.

The authors noted several limitations. Most studies relied on self-report surveys, which may overstate socially desirable attitudes while failing to capture implicit beliefs or observable classroom practice. Intervention studies were primarily pre–post without control groups, limiting causal claims, and few examined whether changes in beliefs translated into long-term practice or student outcomes. Geographic representation was also uneven, with studies concentrated in North America, Europe, and Australia, despite the inclusion of 17 low- and middle-income countries.

Overall, the meta-analysis demonstrates that teacher beliefs about inclusion are malleable through training, especially when anchored in real classroom practice. The authors argue teacher preparation and professional development prioritize belief reflection and confidence-building through short, high-quality interventions that combine theoretical coursework with hands-on field experiences in inclusive classrooms.

Although Dignath et al. (2022) examined teachers across all grade levels, the study is highly relevant to preschool inclusion because it illuminates how teacher beliefs, formed early in training and refined through experience, shape the success of inclusive practice. Preschool inclusion is shaped by the same systemic factors—teacher preparation, professional development, and school culture—that affect inclusion at

higher grade levels. The study's recommendations for short, targeted, and reflective interventions provide an evidence base for designing professional learning for early educators.

Kondo and colleagues (2023) investigated how prepared California EC educators feel to include preschoolers with disabilities, examining the influence of education level, program type, and disability-related training on teachers' comfort, knowledge of special education processes, and general beliefs about inclusion. The study is situated in a context where only 27.3% of California preschoolers with disabilities attended inclusive programs in 2018, reflecting the state's historic reliance on segregated "special day" models. Notably, neither California's Child Development Teacher Permit nor Head Start mandates special education coursework for lead teachers.

Using a cross-sectional survey, the authors collected data from 89 teachers working in NAEYC-accredited private preschools (n=22), Head Start programs (n=36), and California State Preschool Program (CSPP) classrooms (n=31). The majority (93%) had experience with children with disabilities, most often speech/language impairment or autism (84% each). The 35 item instrument gathered demographics (20 items) and 15 Likert type items indexing: (a) knowledge of the IEP process and IEP goals, (b) perceived ability to support children with and without disabilities, (c) comfort welcoming a child with disabilities, and (d) general beliefs about inclusion (e.g., whether "not all" or "most" children benefit). Analyses revealed that teachers broadly endorsed inclusion, but many expressed less comfort in implementation. Education level did not significantly predict knowledge of the IEP process, perceived ability to support all learners, or comfort welcoming children with disabilities. Interestingly, teachers with master's degrees were more likely to agree that "not all" children thrive in inclusive settings, signaling a conditional or integration-oriented stance, even as most respondents agreed that "most"

children benefit from inclusion with effective support. Program type showed limited effects, though Head Start teachers were more likely to report confidence in supporting children with and without disabilities equally compared to their private and CSPP peers.

Training emerged as the strongest differentiator. Teachers who had completed coursework or professional development related to disability were significantly more comfortable welcoming children with disabilities into their classrooms, although training was not associated with higher IEP knowledge or self-rated ability. The study underscores a persistent gap: endorsement of inclusion is widespread, but comfort and readiness depend heavily on targeted, experience-based training. The authors recommend expanding structured fieldwork in inclusive classrooms, mandating disability-focused coursework, and scaling itinerant and co-teaching models to bolster ECE teachers' preparedness. Limitations include reliance on self-report, the cross-sectional design, and a sample skewed toward highly educated and experienced teachers, which may overstate readiness. Nonetheless, the findings highlight training—rather than degree level or program type—as the clearest lever to move from philosophical support for inclusion to confident enactment in preschool settings

Shen and Musyoka (2025) conducted a phenomenological study examining the experiences of fifteen ECSE teachers who served as lead instructors in inclusive preschool classrooms. While much prior research has centered on general education teachers or itinerant ECSE staff, this study addressed a gap by focusing specifically on ECSE teachers serving as lead instructors in inclusive settings.

Grounded in House's (1981) framework of work-related supports—emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal—the study investigated how these forms of support influence ECSE teachers' resilience and practice. Fifteen female ECSE lead teachers from three school districts in a western U.S. state participated, each with at

least five years of experience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Four themes emerged: 1) teachers' perspectives on inclusion, 2) the supports they receive or lack, 3) their resilience strategies and 4) their recommendations for teacher preparation and professional development.

Participants viewed inclusion as an umbrella concept focused on meeting the needs of all children and emphasized that mixed-ability classrooms allow children with and without disabilities to learn from one another. They described inclusion as crucial for fostering social and academic growth, noting that peers serve as important models for language and social skills. Despite their commitment to inclusion, teachers reported feeling isolated and under-supported. Many described a lack of emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal support from administrators. The study identified shortages of qualified paraprofessionals and inadequate funding as key barriers, placing additional burdens on lead teachers and jeopardizing the quality of inclusive services.

Shen and Musyoka concluded that ECSE teachers require comprehensive professional development and both logistical and emotional support to sustain inclusive practice; they urged policymakers to invest in paraprofessional training and provide resources that enable teachers to collaborate with colleagues and families.

Microsystem

Hanline et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis to examine what occurs for children with and without disabilities when they participate in inclusive EC classrooms in the U.S. The authors synthesized eight peer-reviewed U.S. studies published between 1975 and 2023. The following search terms were used: “qual*” and “handicap*” or “disab*” or “developmental delay” or “impair*” and “inclus*” or “integration” or “mainstream*” and “student*” or “child*.” Searches were limited to peer-reviewed articles written in English and published between 1975 and May of 2023,

resulting in 451 studies. The analysis, guided by PRISMA procedures and grounded-theory identified three cross-study themes: 1) access and full participation, 2) peer relationships and valuing, and 3) autonomy in interactions.

First, inclusive settings that prioritized both access and active participation, through accommodations such as fidgets at story time or alternative seating, were linked to measurable gains in communication, play, social-emotional, and academic skills. Second, relationships and peer valuing developed over time, often seeded by teacher strategies such as buddy systems, but evolving into genuine peer advocacy and celebration of classmates' successes. Third, autonomy in interactions increased as children gained repeated opportunities to direct the nature of their social exchanges, revealing agency and reciprocity across disability lines. Hanline et al. (2024) findings collectively frame inclusion as more than physical placement, underscoring that sustained access plus responsive supports enable participation, learning, and evolving friendships.

The synthesis was methodologically rigorous, with all included studies meeting trustworthiness criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) and employing triangulation, code–recode checks, and reflexivity procedures. Still, several constraints temper interpretation: the small pool of eligible studies (n=8), heterogeneity of disability profiles, U.S. only sampling, and limited reporting on program quality or “active ingredients” of inclusion. These gaps limit the ability to link specific practices to observed outcomes. Substantively, the review makes a strong case that inclusive ECE works when programs guarantee access and participation, create structured peer opportunities, and respect children's agency in social life. Hanline et al. (2024) call for research that more precisely connects classroom features (e.g., instructional approaches, staffing models, peer-mediated supports) to children's outcomes, and for teacher

preparation that emphasizes embedding supports and designing everyday peer opportunities. In practice, the findings align with policy aims to expand high- quality EC inclusion by highlighting the relational, instructional, and child-directed dynamics that sustain it.

Huckstadt and Shutts (2014) investigated whether preschool-aged children use disability status to guide social evaluations and whether inclusive schooling environments shape those judgments. The study involved 69 typically developing 3- to 5-year-olds from four Midwestern preschools, two with formal inclusion programs and two without, who were tested twice, once in the fall (September/October) and again midyear (January/February). Demographically, the sample skewed toward high socioeconomic status, with most parents holding college degrees, which likely reflects relatively privileged schooling contexts.

Each child completed three laboratory-style measures designed to probe distinct dimensions of social evaluation: (1) a vignette preference task that paired photographs of unfamiliar peers with short verbal descriptions (six disability labels: visual, hearing, physical, autism, ADHD, cognitive; and six mildly negative but non-disability facts, such as “forgot lunch”); (2) a visible preference task using side-by-side photographs of a child using a wheelchair and a matched nondisabled peer; and (3) a norm violation task in which children judged “how OK” it was that a peer deviated from a group game norm, comparing a typically developing (TD) conformer, a TD violator, and a visually impaired child whose deviation was necessitated by disability. In all tasks, responses were collected on a three-point smiley-face scale (-1 = negative, 0 = neutral, $+1$ = positive), and data were analyzed with repeated-measures ANOVAs and one-sample t tests relative to the scale midpoint.

Huckstadt and Shutts (2014) findings were consistent across measures but nuanced. In the visible preference task, children reliably expressed greater willingness to befriend nondisabled peers over peers using wheelchairs; however, both groups were rated above neutral, suggesting preference rather than rejection. In the vignette preference task, children's evaluations of peers described with disabilities clustered around the midpoint and did not significantly differ from ratings of peers linked to mildly negative but non-disability facts, with item-level variation small and inconsistent. The norm violation task revealed strong disapproval of rule-breaking regardless of disability: children rated TD violators and visually impaired violators equivalently, while normative actions by TD peers were consistently endorsed. Together, these findings suggest that visible disability cues shaped peer liking, but children did not globally devalue disability labels, and their judgments about conduct were dominated by a strong early-emerging commitment to group norms rather than disability considerations.

Importantly, the Huckstadt and Shutts (2014) found no reliable effects of school type, gender, or time: children in inclusion settings were not significantly more positive toward peers with disabilities than those in non-inclusion schools. The authors caution, however, that the power to detect such effects was limited, and the "non-inclusion" preschools did include small numbers of children with IEPs, potentially diluting the contrast between school types. Methodological limitations further constrain interpretation. All photo stimuli depicted White, same-gender peers, restricting generalizability across racial and gender diversity. The wheelchair photos captured only one form of visible disability, while the vignette task relied on relatively complex verbal descriptions of conditions such as autism and ADHD that preschoolers may not fully understand. Finally, the norm violation task may reflect children's strong orientation to rules and fairness more than stable disability attitudes.

Even with these constraints, Huckstadt and Shutts (2014) offer important insights. By triangulating appearance-based, label-based, and conduct-based measures, Huckstadt and Shutts demonstrate that early biases are situational rather than uniformly negative. Visible disability cues influence friendship preferences, but children's strong deference to rules overrides disability considerations in moral evaluations. For practitioners, the findings point to the need for explicit teaching about accommodations helping children understand why a peer might "do it differently", and for structured opportunities that go beyond mere exposure to cultivate positive, ability-aware interactions in inclusive settings.

Diamond and Hong (2010) investigated when and why preschoolers choose to include or exclude a peer with a physical disability during play, focusing on the role of activity demands, fairness prompts, and children's theory of mind (ToM). ToM refers to the ability to understand that others have perspectives, beliefs, and desires that may differ from one's own, a skill that supports perspective taking and more advanced social reasoning.

The study included 72 children (ages 3–5, average age just over 4 years) from seven inclusive preschool classrooms in a Midwestern city. Each child completed two tasks: (a) a set of four false-belief tasks to assess ToM, and (b) an inclusion interview using two dolls, a nondisabled child and a wheelchair-using child, across four activities that varied in physical demand (kicking a ball and dancing vs. painting and tabletop toys). For each activity, children made choices under two conditions: a baseline (no difference in experience) and an unequal condition (the child with a disability had never done the activity, while the nondisabled child had). Children also explained their choices, which were coded as moral (fairness, turn-taking, adaptation) or conventional (ability, equipment, prior experience). Reliability of coding was very high (94%).

Diamond and Hong (2010) found that overall, children preferred the nondisabled peer, selecting them about two-thirds of the time. Still, inclusion of the child with a disability increased in two important situations: (1) when the activity required minimal motor skills (such as painting or tabletop play) and (2) when fairness was highlighted (the wheelchair user had “never done it before”). In these situations, children were noticeably more likely to include the child with a disability. ToM skills also mattered. Children with more advanced ToM were more likely than others to include the child in the wheelchair, and they were especially sensitive to the low- demand and fairness conditions. Importantly, when children did include the child with a disability, they tended to explain their choice with fairness-based reasons (e.g., “it’s his turn” or “she hasn’t done it yet”) rather than ability-based explanations.

The study’s strengths include a design that let each child encounter all conditions, a validated ToM measure, and reliable coding. Its limitations include reliance on hypothetical vignettes (so it is unclear how well the findings predict real peer behavior), focus only on visible physical disability (wheelchair use), and a fairness condition that may have nudged children toward inclusive choices.

Overall, Diamond and Hong (2010) shows that preschoolers’ inclusion decisions are flexible rather than fixed. Children are more willing to include a peer with a disability when activities are accessible and when fairness is emphasized, and those with stronger perspective-taking skills are especially responsive. For practice, this means that teachers can encourage inclusion by adapting classroom activities to reduce physical barriers and by explicitly framing situations in terms of fairness and equity. Supporting children’s perspective-taking skills may further strengthen inclusive choices. Future studies should connect these vignette-based findings to children’s actual classroom behaviors and expand the focus beyond visible physical disabilities.

Stanton-Chapman and Schmidt (2016) surveyed 303 special education professionals in Virginia—including early interventionists, EC special educators, and K–6 special educators—to understand how they perceive the accessibility and play value of school and community playgrounds for children with disabilities. The study used the Playground Attitude and Perception Survey, a 21-item instrument that combined closed-ended demographic and equipment questions with five open-ended prompts about barriers, experiences, and ideal designs. The survey was vetted by experts, pilot-tested, and distributed online and in paper form through program directors, with additional recruitment at teacher workdays. Responses were analyzed with frequency counts for closed-ended questions and content analysis of written comments, supported by qualitative coding software.

Findings painted a consistent picture of limited inclusion. Almost all respondents (99%) reported that their students could not fully participate on playgrounds, citing inappropriate facilities, safety concerns (93%), lack of student interest (66%), and absence of preferred activities (53%). Reports of social isolation were also common (37%). The most frequently available equipment was activity panels (99%), steps (98%), slides (92%), and swings (84%), while wheelchair ramps (4%) and wheelchair swings (0%) were nearly absent.

Open-ended responses revealed three main themes. First, professionals emphasized that current playgrounds often fail to meet all students' needs. For example, some children “wander around” due to a lack of appealing or usable options, while others are excluded entirely when structures lack ramps. Second, participants described segregation caused by inaccessible surfacing (e.g., wood chips preventing wheelchair use) or layouts that slowed children with disabilities and left them behind their peers. Teachers reported physically carrying students up steps just to give them access to peers,

underscoring the inadequacy of existing structures. Third, even when accessible equipment was available, it was often described as boring—such as “ramps to nothing” or panels that provided access without meaningful play opportunities. Respondents also noted the lack of preschool-appropriate equipment and the importance of peer buddy systems to scaffold participation and foster friendships.

Stanton-Chapman and Schmidt (2016) argue that playground development must go beyond minimum ADA compliance toward universal design (UD), emphasizing not only accessibility but also sociability and playability, features that encourage social interaction, engagement, and diverse sensory input (vestibular, proprioceptive, tactile). They also stress that inclusive environments should be paired with social-emotional and peer-mediated supports, since accessible structures alone do not guarantee meaningful play or interaction.

Strengths of the study include a large and diverse practitioner sample, transparent survey development, and alignment between research questions and methods. However, several limitations temper the findings: the self-selected sample came from a single state; perspectives may be biased toward educators serving students who experience more playground challenges; responses relied on self-report without observational verification; some disability groups (e.g., deaf-blindness, visual impairments) were not represented.

In conclusion, the Stanton-Chapman and Schmidt (2016) provides compelling evidence that current playgrounds often exclude children with disabilities despite ADA compliance. Its practical contribution lies in quantifying gaps (e.g., scarcity of ramps, lack of wheelchair swings) and naming social-organizational barriers (e.g., surfacing, pace of play). The authors recommend that policymakers and developers adopt UD principles while also embedding peer and teacher supports, with future research needed

to test whether such designs measurably improve participation and interaction in real-world settings

Using a qualitative descriptive design, Alsarawi and Murry (2024) explored how caregivers perceive both physical and social accessibility at a city-built, universal-design playground (“Aven’s Village”) and how children with and without disabilities interact there. Eleven caregivers (parents, grandparents, and school personnel) who had visited the playground at least once in the prior month completed in-depth, semi-structured interviews; participants were purposefully sampled to provide information-rich cases. The authors analyzed transcripts with a seven-stage content-analysis process (e.g., segmenting meaning units, condensing, clustering), reached coder consensus, and used an external expert to peer-review the coding for trustworthiness. Two research questions guided the work: 1) perceptions of accessibility and use for children with disabilities, and 2) perceptions of interactions between children with and without disabilities. The setting, a large public playground designed to ADA/Universal Design principles with rubberized surfacing, ramps, sensory features, swings (including adaptive seats), and ziplines.

Alsarawi and Murry (2024) findings clustered into two overarching categories, physical accessibility and social accessibility, with four recurring themes: safety, variety/options in equipment, social interaction, and building friendships. Caregivers emphasized how specific design elements (e.g., continuous ramps, high-sided slides, open sightlines, and rubberized surfacing) created a safer, more independently navigable environment for children who use mobility supports, which in turn freed children (and adults) to focus on play rather than risk management. The perceived abundance and diversity of equipment were linked to more opportunities for side-by-side and cooperative play with peers without disabilities. Reports of spontaneous conversations,

shared games, and quick formation of “instant” friendships suggested that well-designed physical environments scaffold social participation; the authors interpret this through Bandura’s Social Learning Theory—attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation—as children observe peers, try out behaviors, and receive social reinforcement. The study concludes that inclusive playgrounds can function as community assets that translate policy ideals about inclusion into everyday experiences, and it recommends engaging caregivers as key stakeholders in design and evaluation.

Methodologically, the study’s strengths include a clear qualitative frame, purposeful sampling tied to the research questions, transparent multi-stage content analysis with consensus building, and a peer-review check of coding. However, the design also constrains inference. The small, single-site sample ($n = 11$) from one exemplary, well-resourced playground limits transferability to typical parks; data collection during colder weather likely depressed usage and may have shaped who participated; and the reliance on caregiver reports (several of whom were education professionals) introduces selection and social-desirability biases and omits children’s own perspectives. The disability range represented was narrow and not systematically analyzed. Alsarawi and Murry (2024) acknowledge these issues and call for studies that (a) include children as informants, (b) sample across multiple playgrounds and seasons, and (c) examine whether observed social gains generalize to schools and other community settings.

Pavia & Mason (2012) examine how families that include a child with a disability make day-to-day inclusion/exclusion decisions in public consumption (e.g., dining out, shopping) and how those choices become part of the family’s identity work. Drawing on grounded-theory, phenomenological methods, they recruited 23 U.S. parents (mostly mothers) via a parentsupport newsletter and flyers in two regions; interviews were

typically conducted in homes, lasted 1–2 hours, were audio-recorded and transcribed, and sometimes occurred with the child present. Analysis proceeded iteratively with independent coding, constant comparison, and category development (e.g., inclusion/exclusion, covering/telling the truth, fighting back/giving up), which also informed subsequent interviews.

Pavia & Mason's (2012) core finding is that decisions about "who consumes together, where, and when" hinge on the nature of the child's disability (cognitive/behavioral challenges, mobility limitations, and visible difference) and are powerfully shaped by parental self-stigmatization (e.g., feeling like a "bad parent" for including or excluding the child) as well as anticipated stigma from others; these forces are summarized in a push–pull model that differentiates special, family-building occasions from mundane tasks and high-control from low-control settings.

Families described pragmatic stigma-management strategies—modification (changing times/venues), passing (preferring less scripted settings), and, when exclusion was chosen, substitution (creating private celebrations)—alongside a longer-term stance of acceptance to temper self-blame; the authors argue that these practices both respond to and constitute the family's collective identity. Policy reflections note that accessibility laws have reduced physical barriers, but respite care remains a key gap; paradoxically, better respite may at times support healthy, identity-affirming decisions to "exclude" for particular events while preserving inclusive family life overall.

As a qualitative, convenience sample drawn from two U.S. regions and largely from mothers, findings are not statistically generalizable and may reflect selection bias among "parents willing to tell their stories." The data rely on parent self-report at one point in time (no systematic observation of actual consumption episodes, limited direct child/sibling voice), which may underrepresent interactions as they naturally occur.

These constraints, acknowledged in the methods details, bound transferability to other contexts, family structures, and cultures.

Child

Watson and Newman (2023) investigated how very young children conceptualize inclusive EC spaces, with the aim of directly feeding their perspectives into the design of a new center. The study was conducted in a low-income, ethnically diverse Sydney suburb with many Lebanese immigrant families. Twenty-six children aged 3–5 years, including four with diagnosed disabilities (autism, selective mutism, and speech/language delays), participated.

Grounded in children’s rights and participatory research traditions, the authors employed a Mosaic-inspired, multimodal design over two weeks. Children engaged in three phases: (1) child-led photo tours of “places they liked” within their current setting, (2) pair interviews using both their own photos and comparison images of other play spaces (e.g., wheelchair swings, natural environments), and (3) draw-and-talk sessions where children imagined their ideal new spaces. Data consisted of 387 photographs (40 discarded), six pair interviews, and four pair draw-and-talk sessions. Ethical safeguards included parental consent, child assent, and conducting all activities visibly within the center.

Using inductive thematic analysis, the authors identified four central themes. Places for relationships dominated, as 42% of children’s photos depicted people, underscoring the centrality of friendships and family ties. Places that are safe and clean reflected children’s ambivalence: while they valued protection from hazards, they also wanted to climb, run, and take risks. Post-COVID norms heightened children’s dislike of dirt and mess, highlighting cultural and religious values around hygiene. Places for movement and privacy showed children’s preference for outdoor spaces, hiding spots,

and vantage points where they could observe without being constantly observed by adults. Finally, places for becoming captured children's rejection of "fake" plastic toys and desire for real, authentic materials—mirroring their sense of competence and cultural practices, such as using real tools or preparing food.

Discussion

Taken together, the literature reviewed across ecological levels illustrates that inclusion is not a discrete initiative but a systemic condition sustained through alignment among policy, leadership, professional learning, and daily practice. At the macrosystem level, comparative research (Tobin et al., 2011) reveals how national and cultural values shape educators' conceptions of autonomy, empathy, and collective responsibility, underscoring that beliefs about what children "should" learn are deeply cultural rather than universal. Within the exosystem, administrators' attitudes and leadership behaviors emerge as pivotal levers (Balikci et al. 2025; Steed et al., 2023) demonstrating that when leaders frame inclusion as a right supported by resources and professional learning rather than as a logistical challenge, teachers' confidence and implementation fidelity improve. At the microsystem level, meta-syntheses and classroom studies (Shen & Musyoka, 2025; Hanline et al., 2024;) highlight that reflective coaching, collegial trust, and intentional design of peer interactions transform inclusion from policy into lived experience.

Research situated at the level of the child reveals how these systemic forces manifest in children's daily lives, demonstrating how children's own narratives emphasize friendship, agency, and authentic participation as hallmarks of inclusive environments (Watson and Newman, 2023; & Coussens et al.; 2020), while developmental studies (Huckstadt & Shutts, 2014; Diamond & Hong, 2010) show that social attitudes and moral reasoning about fairness begin forming in early childhood and

are influenced by the environments adults create. When these systems function coherently, when leaders model inclusive values, teachers are supported through sustained professional learning, environments are intentionally designed, and children are empowered as active participants, belonging becomes a normative feature of early education rather than an exception. Conversely, when disjunctions occur between levels, the result is fragmentation, isolation, and inequitable opportunity. This systems perspective underscores that durable inclusion depends not only on policy mandates but also on cultivating shared mindsets and relational trust across all layers of the ecology. The following theme therefore moves from structure to culture, examining how attitudes, beliefs, and implicit biases operate as the deepest and most enduring influences on inclusion in early childhood education.

Theme 3. Fostering a Sustainable Culture of Inclusion

The most frequently reported barrier to early childhood inclusion that has remained largely unchanged over the past several decades are attitudes and beliefs...false beliefs and negative attitudes about inclusion...stereotyping of children with disabilities...lack of awareness of the benefits for all children... Any effort to expand access to inclusive early childhood programs for children with disabilities needs to be accompanied by a strong focus on shifting attitudes and beliefs (U.S. Departments of HHS & ED, 2015, p. 6).

Across decades of scholarship, educators and policymakers have acknowledged that the most persistent barriers to inclusion are not structural but ideological rooted in the beliefs, expectations, and implicit biases that shape how adults perceive and respond to difference (; Huang et al., 2023). Even as laws, funding mechanisms, and professional standards evolve, the realization of inclusion ultimately hinges on the mindsets of those who enact them. This theme therefore turns inward, focusing on the mindset of

inclusion: the values, assumptions, and habitual judgments that influence interactions between adults and children, among colleagues, and within communities of practice. By synthesizing research on attitudes, beliefs, and implicit bias, Theme 3 explores how mindset operates as both the most entrenched and the most transformative dimension of early childhood inclusion—offering insight into how a culture of belonging can be intentionally cultivated and sustained across time and context.

Implicit Bias

The scoping review by Huang et al. (2023) found that implicit biases, defined as an unconscious evaluation of the object in one's own thoughts, consistently reflected a negative preference toward people with disabilities. Across studies, participants, regardless of profession or background, demonstrated an automatic preference for nondisabled individuals. The type of disability influenced the strength and nature of the bias. Intellectual and psychiatric disabilities often carried stronger negative associations than physical disabilities, though people with physical disabilities (such as wheelchair users or those who are blind) were also implicitly viewed less favorably. Invisible disabilities, such as dyslexia, depression, or chronic illness, were less frequently studied but still revealed negative associations. Specific stereotypes included viewing people with disabilities as less competent, dependent, or childlike, as evidenced in measures like the Infantilization Implicit Association Test (IAT). While some research suggested that direct experience or contact with individuals with disabilities might reduce these implicit biases, the findings were inconsistent. Intervention studies also yielded mixed results: certain approaches, such as virtual reality simulations or inclusive sports programs, reduced bias, while others had no effect, and one even reported an increase in bias. Overall, the review highlights that implicit disability biases are pervasive and often

manifest as automatic associations of disability with incompetence, dependence, and reduced social value.

Following the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) guidelines and the PRISMA-ScR reporting framework, Huang et al. (2023) systematically searched seven databases, five rehabilitation counseling journals, and reference lists for studies published between 2000 and April 2022. Inclusion criteria required studies to be empirical, quantitative, published in English, and to measure implicit disability bias in adult participants. Out of 283 articles screened, 66 studies met the criteria. Data were charted on study design, sample characteristics, measurement tools, and findings. Most studies (68%) were U.S.-based, with participants primarily White, female, and nondisabled. Across the 66 studies, the Implicit Association Test (IAT) was by far the most common tool, used in 57 studies (86%). Variations included the Disability Attitude IAT, multiple-disability IATs, and single-category or single-target versions. Other methods included priming tasks (6%), inhibition tasks such as go/no-go association (3%), and rating-scale based tasks (4.5%).

Huang et al. (2023) acknowledge several limitations. The search excluded studies using terms like “unconscious bias,” potentially missing relevant literature. Heavy reliance on the IAT narrows methodological diversity. Most IATs focus on physical disabilities, leaving invisible disabilities (e.g., mental illness, learning disorders) underrepresented. IAT’s reliance on visual stimuli limits participation for people with visual impairments. IAT scores may be influenced by cognitive or motor skills, practice effects, or literacy, raising concerns about validity. While context-rich, they blur the line between implicit and explicit attitudes, risking social desirability bias.

Nevertheless, this review highlights both the progress and shortcomings in measuring implicit disability bias. The dominance of IAT-based measures underscores

the need for more inclusive, diverse, and accessible tools that account for different types of disabilities and contexts. The findings reinforce the importance of measuring and addressing implicit bias in training, professional education, and client services to combat ableism and improve outcomes.

Implicit bias has been learned over a lifetime of media exposure and experiences, and short-term interventions simply don't change those attitudes and behaviors. Research suggests that implicit bias interventions may be more impactful when introduced in EC. Instead of attempting to change implicit bias, it is recommended that strategists focus on school settings where children learn values.

Similarly, Bani Odeh and Lach (2024) conducted a descriptive review examining global barriers to and facilitators of education for children with disabilities (CWD) aged 6–18 years. The authors also followed the JBI guidelines for scoping reviews and searched three databases (Academic Search Complete, SocINDEX, and ERIC) for English-language studies published between 2013 and 2021. Of 7,072 initial records, 54 studies met inclusion criteria: 34 qualitative, 10 quantitative, and 10 mixed-methods. Studies spanned 19 countries, with 40 from high-income contexts and 14 from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

Using the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as analytic frameworks, Bani Odeh and Lach (2024) categorized barriers and facilitators across five domains (products and technology, environment, relationships and support, attitudes, and services/policies) and four ecological levels (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems).

The review found that the most persistent barriers were attitudinal and systemic, particularly negative beliefs about disability among teachers, peers, and communities. In several studies, teachers held deficit-based views of children with disabilities believing

for example, that such students could not learn alongside peers without disabilities or that their presence would impede classroom progress. In Indonesia, nearly 30% of teachers surveyed believed parents of children with autism faced stigma, while 12% attributed autism to “karma” and 17% to breaking a taboo. In India and Ghana, community members described disability as a “curse” or “punishment from God,” leading families to hide disabled children or keep them out of school. Across multiple LMICs, teachers’ reluctance to modify instruction or include CWD reflected entrenched cultural perceptions that positioned disability as tragic rather than diverse.

Peer attitudes also contributed to exclusion; students with disabilities in Palestine reported being mocked, bullied, and ostracized by classmates who called them “dumb” or “slow.” Parents further noted being shamed or blamed within their communities, especially mothers of children with visible disabilities. At a systemic level, schools often reinforced these beliefs through segregated placements, unclear inclusive education policies, and insufficient teacher training, leaving attitudinal barriers unaddressed at every ecological layer—from the microsystem of teacher–student interactions to the macrosystem of cultural norms and policy ideologies.

Facilitators included family–school collaboration, teacher professional development, assistive technology, and advocacy networks that strengthened parent participation. However, only three of the 54 studies included the direct voices of children with disabilities themselves, underscoring a major gap in the literature. The authors concluded that the translation of inclusive ideals into practice remains hampered by deeply rooted attitudinal biases and structural incoherence across education systems.

Bani Odeh and Lach (2024) noted limitations related to the absence of standardized quality appraisal across studies (a feature of descriptive reviews), an overrepresentation of high-income contexts, and the scarcity of CWD’s own perspectives

in the evidence base. Consequently, while the review provides a comprehensive map of barriers, empirical evidence on effective facilitators and culturally grounded attitude-change strategies remains limited.

Although Bani Odeh and Lach (2024) conducted a global review, their findings resonate deeply with the challenges and opportunities present within American ECE systems. The attitudinal and systemic barriers identified, particularly teachers' deficit-based views of disability, limited parent–school collaboration, and policy ambiguities, mirror persistent issues within U.S. preschool contexts striving to actualize IDEA's vision of inclusion. In many

American settings, educators' underlying beliefs continue to influence how “readiness,” “normalcy,” and “appropriate placement” are defined, often resulting in exclusionary practices under the guise of developmental appropriateness. The study's application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory underscores that inclusive early learning environments cannot be achieved solely through classroom-level interventions; rather, they require coherence across microsystem (teacher–child interactions), mesosystem (home–school partnerships), exosystem (district-level supports and services), and macrosystem (societal beliefs and policy ideologies). In this sense, Bani Odeh and Lach's analysis provides a global mirror reflecting the cultural underpinnings of inclusion in the United States—where structural inequities, fragmented policy implementation, and enduring ableist attitudes continue to impede universal access to high quality early learning. Their call for greater attention to children's voices and family advocacy aligns directly with current efforts in U.S. early childhood systems to elevate family partnership, social–emotional learning, and equity-centered professional learning as pathways to cultivating a sustainable culture of inclusion.

Skinner et al. (2017) investigated whether preschool-aged children can “catch” social biases simply by observing adults display nonverbal favoritism. Building on Allport’s (1954) idea of prejudice being absorbed from an “infected atmosphere,” the researchers asked if biased nonverbal signals could not only influence children’s immediate preferences but also generalize to other individuals associated with the favored or disfavored target.

Two experiments were conducted with preschool children (ages 4–5). In Experiment 1 (N = 67), children watched videos in which adult actors treated two neutral targets identically in speech but displayed positive nonverbal signals (smiling, leaning in, warm tone) toward one target and negative nonverbal signals (scowling, leaning away, cold tone) toward the other. Children’s preferences were then assessed through explicit choice (which target they liked better), prosocial behavior (which target received a toy), and imitation tasks (label and action copying). In Experiment 2 (N = 81), the design was extended to test whether these biases generalized to “best friends” of the original targets, thereby probing whether bias spreads beyond direct exposure.

In Experiment 1, children significantly preferred the positively cued target: 67% chose them as “liked better,” 66% gave them the toy, and 63% used their label for a novel object. The action imitation task trended in the same direction but was nonsignificant. Overall, a composite bias score confirmed a consistent preference for the positively signaled target. In Experiment 2, results replicated and extended these effects. Children again preferred and acted more prosocially toward the favored target and even generalized their bias to the target’s best friend, particularly in imitation tasks. Thus, children not only absorbed nonverbal bias but also extended it to associated group members.

Skinner et al. (2017) acknowledge several caveats. First, the stimuli were highly explicit—positive and negative nonverbal signals were exaggerated, raising questions about whether subtler everyday cues would have the same impact. Second, it remains unclear whether children’s responses were driven more by positive signals, negative signals, or both. Third, the laboratory setting may not fully reflect real-world conditions where children encounter more complex and mixed social cues. Finally, the study did not test whether children themselves go on to reproduce biased nonverbal behaviors, which would be critical for understanding how bias perpetuates socially.

Nevertheless, this research demonstrates that preschool children can rapidly acquire new social biases through exposure to adults’ nonverbal cues. Moreover, such biases can spread beyond an individual to their social group, suggesting a mechanism by which prejudice can form and generalize early in life. These findings underscore the importance of attending to the subtle nonverbal behaviors adults model, as they may unintentionally transmit bias to children.

Christensen et al. (2023) examined the use of a simulated teaching environment, Sim School, to detect and address implicit bias among educators. The study focused on framing effects—differences in teacher decision-making based on how identical student information is presented—particularly regarding gender and English Language Learner (ELL) status. The underlying goal was to determine whether simulation-based professional development could surface implicit bias, provide feedback, and ultimately support teachers in reducing biased expectations and practices.

The researchers employed a professional development design in which 40 teachers completed multiple modules across grade bands, each involving five iterations of teaching the same simulated students. Student avatars were systematically varied by gender and ELL labeling while maintaining identical performance profiles. Teachers

received real-time system-generated tips and post-session analytics, including performance charts and timelines, and were asked to rate students' likelihood of success both before and after modules. These data provided measures of bias, teaching behaviors, and responsiveness to system feedback.

Findings revealed consistent evidence of implicit bias regarding ELL status. Teachers rated students labeled as ELL as "less likely to succeed" despite identical performance characteristics, replicating results from the first year of the project. This effect was statistically significant across both avatar-based and name-based presentations. At the same time, behavioral data showed that teachers devoted more targeted instructional actions to ELL labeled students in response to simulation prompts, suggesting a tension between lowered expectations and heightened instructional support. Gender effects were weaker: teachers' ratings did not show systematic bias toward male or female students, although some trends suggested teachers were more likely to act on tips for female students.

Christensen et al. (2023) study has several limitations. First, while simulations provide a safe environment for surfacing bias, teacher responses to avatars may not fully generalize to live classrooms with real students. Second, the small sample size ($N = 40$) limits generalizability, especially given the diversity of teacher backgrounds and grade levels. Third, the mixed findings—lower expectations but more supportive actions for ELL students—raise interpretive challenges about whether teacher behavior reflects implicit bias, culturally responsive responsiveness, or both. Finally, the study does not yet examine whether repeated cycles of reflection and feedback lead to measurable reductions in bias over time, though this is planned for future research.

In conclusion, Christensen et al. (2023) demonstrate the value of simulation-based professional development for detecting and reflecting on implicit bias in

educators. Their findings highlight persistent bias against students labeled as ELL and suggest that real-time data feedback can both expose problematic expectations and promote more equitable teaching practices. The study underscores the complexity of teacher bias, showing that lowered expectations and increased instructional attention may coexist, and calls for continued research on how iterative feedback in simulations can foster lasting shifts in teacher beliefs and behaviors.

Implicit Bias Training

Implicit bias training is known by many names, including unconscious bias training and anti-bias training. No matter its name, this training is often broken down into four main categories: (1) awareness raising, (2) implicit bias change, (3) explicit bias change, and (4) behavior change. The core goal of these trainings is to support people in acknowledging their own unconscious biases, with the understanding that awareness of one's behavior and decisions at an unconscious level is the first step in changing behavior.

Hoffman and Winter (2022) reviewed decades of social psychology research to identify evidence-based strategies for reducing unconscious bias. Their purpose was to translate empirical findings into practical guidance for individuals and organizations, especially for legal and dispute resolution professionals who are expected to remain impartial—while also addressing the broader societal challenge of entrenched implicit prejudice.

The authors conducted a narrative review of empirical studies and meta-analyses, drawing on both laboratory experiments and field research. They highlighted seven broad categories of strategies that have shown potential for reducing bias: raising awareness of bias, increasing motivation to act without prejudice, individuation, perspective-taking and empathy, intergroup contact, stereotype replacement, and

mindfulness. In addition, they examined multi- strategy interventions, such as Devine et al.'s (2012) "habit-breaking" program, which combined several approaches over a sustained twelve-week period.

Hoffman and Winter (2022) found that interventions targeting awareness, such as coursework on prejudice or gender-bias workshops, can shift attitudes in the short term, though durable effects are harder to achieve. Motivation-based strategies were more successful when driven by individuals' internal commitments to egalitarian values than by external pressure to comply with norms. Individuation techniques, which encourage people to see others as multidimensional rather than as stereotype-based categories, consistently reduced reliance on bias. Perspective-taking and empathy interventions, including storytelling, films, or journaling, were also effective, particularly when vivid and sustained. Similarly, intergroup contact reliably reduced prejudice, especially through meaningful cross-group friendships or cooperative tasks, although negative contact sometimes reinforced bias. Other approaches, such as stereotype replacement through counter-stereotypical images or role models, produced short-term reductions in bias but sometimes led to rebound effects. Finally, mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation showed promise by disrupting automatic associations and cultivating empathy, with studies reporting reductions in implicit race, age, and disability bias.

While each of these strategies had some effect, the strongest evidence pointed to multifaceted interventions sustained over time. Devine and colleagues' long-term habit-breaking study, for example, demonstrated both increased concern about discrimination and measurable reductions in implicit bias weeks after the intervention. However, meta-analyses reviewed by the authors generally found that most single interventions had only fleeting effects, underscoring the difficulty of achieving lasting change.

Hoffman and Winter (2022) also emphasized key limitations in the field. Most interventions produced short-term rather than enduring outcomes, and many relied heavily on university-based samples, limiting generalizability. Measurement challenges persist, with the IAT remaining the most common tool despite concerns about reliability and predictive validity. Contextual factors further complicate implementation; for example, stereotype negation alone can reinforce stereotypes rather than reduce them, and mandatory bias training has in some cases provoked resistance. Finally, the authors argued that unconscious bias cannot be separated from broader societal forces: systemic inequities continuously reinforce individual biases, making structural change essential alongside personal or organizational efforts.

Hoffman and Winter (2022) stressed that unconscious bias is deeply ingrained and resistant to quick fixes. However, progress is possible when interventions are intentional, multi-faceted, and sustained. They argue that meaningful practice requires combining strategies, embedding them in institutional structures through accountability systems, diverse teams, and affinity groups, and supplementing them with systemic reforms. “One-off” unconscious bias trainings, they caution, are insufficient; what is needed is a long-term commitment at both personal and organizational levels to shift entrenched attitudes and reduce discrimination.

Cox and Devine (2019) examined how prejudice can be addressed through what they term empowerment-based confrontation, a model that builds upon but moves beyond individual-level confrontations and traditional diversity trainings. They began by situating their work in the broader landscape of bias reduction. On one hand, individual-level confrontations, in which a person challenges biased remarks or behaviors, have shown that style and source matter: confrontations from members of non-targeted groups are often received more positively, and those framed calmly with specific

evidence of bias are more effective than hostile or vague challenges. On the other hand, group-based trainings, such as diversity or implicit bias workshops, have become widespread but often suffer from defensiveness, lack of theoretical grounding, and limited evidence of long-term effectiveness. These shortcomings, the authors argued, highlight the need for approaches that empower individuals to recognize and regulate their own biases rather than relying solely on external confrontation or didactic training .

The centerpiece of their discussion is the prejudice habit-breaking intervention, which operationalizes empowerment-based confrontation. This intervention, tested across multiple randomized-controlled studies, draws on Devine's (1989) prejudice habit model and adult learning theory. It conceptualizes bias as a "habit of mind" that can be broken through conscious self-regulation. The program aims to align people's behavior with their egalitarian values by guiding them through five components: recognition of sincere non-prejudiced values, awareness of vulnerability to unintentional bias, concern about the consequences of bias, learning effective strategies, and sustaining effort over time. To instill awareness, participants complete the IAT and are presented with relatable examples of unintentional stereotyping, framed in ways that emphasize the ordinariness of bias rather than moral failure. This framing minimizes defensiveness and motivates engagement. Participants are then taught a "toolkit" of empirically supported strategies—such as stereotype replacement, perspective-taking, individuation, considering situational explanations, increasing intergroup contact, and modifying environments—while being cautioned against counterproductive strategies like stereotype suppression or colorblindness.

Evidence for the intervention is encouraging. Participants consistently demonstrated increased awareness of their own vulnerability to bias, heightened concern about discrimination, and greater self-efficacy to regulate prejudice, with effects lasting

from six weeks to two years. While findings on reductions in implicit bias (as measured by the IAT) are mixed, participants often showed lower automatic race bias and, more importantly, became more likely to notice and label bias in themselves, others, and media. Crucially, the intervention also translated into action: in a long-term follow-up, participants were more likely than controls to publicly confront bias in a simulated editorial task. Extensions of the intervention into STEM fields showed improvements in departmental climate and a notable rise in female faculty hires after departments participated, suggesting institutional as well as individual-level impact.

Despite these strengths, Cox and Devine noted important limitations. The intervention works best with individuals who already endorse egalitarian values; for those indifferent or resistant to such values, it may have little effect or even provoke backlash. The exact mechanisms driving observed institutional changes, such as more diverse faculty hiring, remain underexplored. Further, although outcomes like awareness, concern, and climate shifts are well- documented, research has yet to fully measure changes in real-world intergroup interactions or test the intervention across varied contexts beyond academia. Finally, as with other bias- reduction approaches, questions remain about the durability of effects and the scalability of such interventions.

Cox and Devine's empowerment-based confrontation model represents a significant step forward by equipping individuals to become their own "confronters" of bias. Rather than relying on one-off trainings or interpersonal challenges alone, the prejudice habit-breaking intervention empowers well-intentioned individuals to sustain bias reduction efforts, align their actions with egalitarian values, and, in some cases, influence broader institutional change. While not a universal solution, it offers a theoretically grounded, empirically tested pathway for fostering lasting reductions in unintentional bias.

Cox (2022) critically examined why most DEI trainings fail and proposed a scientifically validated alternative rooted in empowerment. The article argued that the widespread reliance on the information deficit model—which assumes bias results from ignorance that can be corrected with information—is the root cause of ineffective or counterproductive DEI efforts. Instead, Cox advanced an empowerment-based approach, drawing on cognitive-behavioral change science, and highlighted the bias habit-breaking training as an empirically supported model for creating lasting change.

Cox (2022) synthesized insights from psychology, clinical science, and management. Cox compared ineffective deficit approaches with empowerment strategies that engage individuals as active agents of change, aligning with their values and motivations. Bias was conceptualized as a “habit of mind” (Devine, 1989), acquired early in life and reinforced over time. Consequently, breaking bias requires the same sustained effort as breaking other entrenched habits. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) was presented as a guiding framework, since CBT equips individuals to identify and disrupt maladaptive thought patterns and sustain self-directed change. Adapting CBT principles, the bias habit-breaking training frames bias as ordinary and unintentional, provides participants with generalizable tools, and empowers them to notice and regulate biased responses.

Evidence reviewed in the article demonstrated the training’s effectiveness across multiple studies. In randomized controlled trials, participants showed increased awareness of their vulnerability to bias, heightened concern about discrimination, and, uniquely, sustained reductions in implicit bias (as measured by the IAT) up to six weeks post-intervention. Longterm follow-ups found that reductions in bias mediated decreases in stereotyping behaviors years later. Other studies showed that trained participants were more likely to confront bias, discuss equity issues in novel contexts,

and share strategies with peers— creating ripple effects beyond individual participation. Field research demonstrated institutional impacts: STEM departments that received the training improved departmental climate and increased hiring of women faculty by 43% compared to controls. Preliminary data in schools suggested reduced racial achievement gaps when more teachers were trained.

Despite promising results, Cox acknowledged limitations. The training appears most effective with individuals who already endorse egalitarian values, raising questions about its impact on those resistant to change. While the model generalizes across many forms of bias, further work is needed to assess its effects in varied institutional contexts and with different populations. The reliance on the IAT as a key measure also remains contested, though behavioral evidence strengthens claims of meaningful impact. Moreover, the intervention's success depends on ongoing individual engagement, making sustainability a challenge without institutional support.

Cox (2022) provided a strong critique of deficit-model DEI trainings and a hopeful, evidence-based roadmap for more effective approaches. By framing bias as a habit, borrowing methods from CBT, and empowering individuals as autonomous agents of change, the bias habit-breaking training offers both theoretical grounding and empirical validation. The article highlights the potential for empowerment-based DEI initiatives to reduce bias, foster inclusion, and promote equity at both individual and institutional levels.

Discussion

Taken together, the literature on attitudes, beliefs, and implicit bias confirms that the sustainability of inclusion depends less on structural reform than on the collective transformation of thought. Decades of research consistently identify educators' perceptions of disability and competence as the most durable predictors of whether

inclusion succeeds or stalls (; Huang et al., 2023). Empirical studies demonstrate that bias operates both explicitly and implicitly, shaping expectations, interactions, and access to opportunity even in well-intentioned settings (Skinner, Meltzoff, & Olson, 2017; Christensen et al., 2023). Yet, emerging evidence also points toward change. Empowerment-based, multi-strategy interventions such as Devine's prejudice-habit model (Cox & Devine, 2019; Cox, 2022) show that sustained reflection, perspective-taking, and individuation can interrupt automatic responses and align practice with egalitarian values. When these strategies are embedded within professional learning, coaching, and organizational norms, they begin to reorient systems toward empathy, accountability, and shared responsibility.

Collectively, these findings suggest that cultivating inclusion as a durable cultural norm requires more than awareness; it demands intentional structures that reinforce new habits of perception and action over time. The persistence of ableist assumptions underscores the need for professional learning models that move beyond information transfer to experiential transformation. The following section responds to this need by translating the research on bias reduction and mindset change into a practical framework for educators, the Inclusion Awareness Program (IAP), designed to operationalize reflection, dialogue, and sustained practice as tools for building a culture of belonging in early childhood education.

Section 3

In conceptualizing what “high inclusion” looks like in early childhood settings, the

Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion developed by the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) and its partner networks offer a coherent, systems-based framework that integrates structural, instructional, relational, and participatory elements (ECTA Center & NCPMI, 2023). Rather than serving as a rigid checklist, these indicators function as a capacity building tool, providing shared language and guiding questions for programs seeking to move from nominal inclusion to authentic, sustainable practice.

Each level of the framework: state, community, program, and classroom, can be viewed as an ecological layer where beliefs, relationships, and policies intersect to shape the daily experiences of young children with and without disabilities. By embedding professional learning, public awareness, and policy alignment across these layers, inclusive capacity becomes both a developmental and systemic process. Importantly, the framework is grounded in several key assumptions: (a) teaching and learning are complex and context-sensitive, (b) professional capacity grows over time through reflection and feedback, (c) growth is mediated by contextual supports (such as coaching, resources, and wellness), and (d) inclusion is a systems responsibility, not simply the burden of individual teachers (ECTA Center & NCPMI, 2023).

Indicator S12: Public Awareness

While the complete ECTA framework contains interconnected indicators spanning funding, data systems, workforce development, and program quality, Indicator S12: Public Awareness represents the ecological layer most directly tied to the macrosystem of

Bronfenbrenner’s model. This indicator emphasizes the responsibility of state and local early childhood agencies to implement sustained public awareness strategies that address the attitudes, beliefs, and legal foundations of inclusion. At the macrosystem level, these strategies shape the overarching cultural narratives that define what society deems “normal,” “capable,” or “belonging,” thereby influencing how inclusion is enacted across all other system layers. Specifically, Indicator S12 calls for agencies to:

1. Co-create public awareness materials that promote the benefits and legal foundations of inclusion;
2. Use formal and informal data to identify attitudes and beliefs that present barriers to inclusion;
3. Address state and local contexts related to laws, attitudes, and beliefs;
4. Ensure accessibility of materials across languages and communication formats;
5. Secure resources for implementation; and
6. Evaluate the effectiveness of public awareness efforts across diverse and historically underserved communities (ECTA Center, 2023).

The IAP responds directly to this indicator by positioning professional learning as both an awareness and engagement strategy. Whereas Indicator S12 calls for the development of broad public communication campaigns, the IAP operationalizes this mandate within the professional community that most directly influences inclusion outcomes—educators and early learning leaders. By equipping practitioners with the skills to recognize and address bias, communicate the benefits of inclusion, and model inclusive language and practices, the IAP functions as a professionalized form of public

awareness. It transforms the educator's role from implementer to advocate, extending awareness beyond the classroom to families, colleagues, and the wider community.

Through this alignment, the IAP not only advances the intent of Indicator S12 but also extends its ecological reach, linking individual mindset change (microsystem) to interpersonal and institutional collaboration (mesosystem) and ultimately to broader cultural transformation (macrosystem). The program's emphasis on reflection, dialogue, and bias-interruption strategies directly addresses the indicator's focus on attitudes and beliefs, while its sustainability plan, anchored in leadership alignment and continuous improvement, addresses the call for evaluation and long-term effectiveness. By situating the IAP within both the ECTA framework and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, this capstone contributes a scalable approach to building inclusion as a lived culture across interconnected systems.

Application of the IAP

The IAP offers an adaptable framework that state and local agencies can integrate into their Indicator S12 public awareness plans to address attitudes, beliefs, and the legal foundations of inclusion. At the state level, agencies can embed the IAP within existing workforce development systems, inclusion initiatives, or Preschool Development Grant activities to strengthen coherence between public messaging and professional capacity-building. In doing so, state leaders fulfill the macrosystem function of cultivating consistent, values-based narratives around inclusion while ensuring that those narratives are embodied by practitioners on the ground. At the community and program levels, the IAP reinforces mesosystem connections by fostering collaboration among administrators, family engagement coordinators, and local partners who shape daily inclusion experiences. Through shared language and structured reflection, programs develop alignment between public awareness materials, family communications, and

instructional practices—ensuring that inclusion is experienced not only as policy but as culture. At the classroom level, the IAP’s reflective tools and bias-habit-breaking strategies (Cox & Devine, 2019) empower educators to translate awareness into equitable action. By recognizing implicit bias, practicing bias interruption, and modeling inclusive communication, teachers serve as microsystem agents who make inclusion visible in everyday interactions. Their actions, in turn, influence families and colleagues, creating feedback loops that reinforce the broader system’s inclusive intent.

Ultimately, integrating the IAP into state and local implementation plans transforms public awareness from a communication campaign into an ecological process of culture building. Each level of the system contributes to and is shaped by the others—demonstrating Bronfenbrenner’s principle of reciprocal influence. Through this alignment, Indicator S12 becomes not merely a measure of public messaging but a living reflection of shared commitment, where policy, practice, and belief converge to sustain a culture of belonging in early childhood education. Building on this systems alignment, the practitioner product developed for this capstone is Improvement Initiative 1 of the IAP: A Bias-Habit Breaking

Workshop. Serving as both the entry point and sustaining mechanism of the larger IAP model.

Improvement Initiative 1

The first initiative of the IAP centers on developing educator awareness of implicit bias and strengthening intrinsic motivation to engage in sustained change via the Bias-Habit Breaking Workshop. Research consistently indicates that meaningful professional learning begins with awareness of the problem and a personal commitment to its resolution (Cox & Devine, 2019; Hoffman & Winter, 2022). In the context of early

childhood inclusion, this means recognizing how implicit assumptions about disability, behavior, and “readiness” influence daily decisions regarding instruction, expectations, and classroom relationships. Without awareness, well-intentioned educators may unknowingly perpetuate patterns of exclusion by lowering expectations for children with disabilities or by structuring environments that privilege certain learners over others (Huang et al., 2023).

The awareness phase of the IAP draws on adult-learning principles that emphasize relevance, reflection, and self-direction (Knowles, 1978). Participants begin by exploring the concept of bias as a habitual cognitive process rather than a moral failing, a framing shown to reduce defensiveness and foster engagement (Devine et al., 2012). Through facilitated dialogue and experiential activities—such as analyzing common classroom scenarios or reflecting on language used in child assessment and family communication—educators examine the subtle ways bias manifests in practice. This initial stage also incorporates a values-clarification component that invites participants to reconnect with their professional purpose as early childhood educators. Aligning personal values with the moral and developmental imperatives of inclusion enhances internal motivation and creates the psychological foundation for sustained behavior change (Cox, 2022).

By combining awareness and motivation, this initiative establishes the conditions necessary for transformative learning. Participants move from compliance-based engagement to reflective commitment, acknowledging both the presence of bias and their agency in addressing it. This process is reinforced through structured self-reflection tools and guided discussions that encourage participants to articulate why inclusion matters in their own context and how their actions contribute to or disrupt it. The intended short-term outcome of this initiative is increased self-awareness and

professional concern about the impact of bias on children’s access, participation, and belonging. The long-term goal is to cultivate a professional mindset in which bias recognition and correction become embedded habits—an essential precondition for the subsequent phases of the IAP focused on practice, collaboration, and systems alignment.

Improvement Initiative 2

The second initiative of the IAP focuses on strengthening professional capacity through structured reflection and peer collaboration. Whereas the first initiative builds awareness and motivation for change, this phase provides the mechanism through which reflection becomes embedded in daily practice and sustained through collegial dialogue. A robust body of research underscores that teachers’ beliefs, efficacy, and instructional decisions evolve most meaningfully within communities of practice that promote critical reflection, mutual trust, and shared problem-solving (Hanline, Eldridge, & Robbins, 2024; Steed et al., 2024).

Reflective practice in the IAP is modeled on a cyclical learning process that integrates observation, self-assessment, discussion, and action planning. Participants engage in guided reflections following professional learning sessions, classroom observations, or instructional challenges. Using structured prompts, educators analyze how their expectations and interactions align—or misalign—with inclusive principles. This process encourages teachers to view their classrooms as living laboratories for inquiry rather than as fixed environments. Through reflection, educators not only recognize bias and barriers but also identify opportunities for more equitable engagement and differentiated support. Reflection is further deepened through peer dialogue, as colleagues share examples of dilemmas, strategies, and successes, allowing new insights to emerge through collective sense-making.

Peer collaboration functions as a multiplier for learning by transforming individual insight into collective capacity. Studies of early childhood coaching and professional learning communities demonstrate that collegial support enhances accountability and reduces isolation, particularly when educators are navigating complex inclusion challenges (Shen & Musyoka, 2025). The IAP leverages this evidence by organizing participants into small reflective learning groups that meet periodically to analyze shared artifacts—such as lesson plans, documentation of children’s learning, or transcripts of child–teacher interactions. These groups operate within a non-evaluative framework, allowing participants to test ideas, receive feedback, and refine practice in psychologically safe spaces.

The expected short-term outcome of this initiative is the emergence of reflective habits that prompt educators to question assumptions and make data-informed, equity-minded decisions. Over time, sustained peer collaboration is anticipated to build collective efficacy—a shared belief that the team has the capacity to meet all learners’ needs—recognized as a critical predictor of improved child outcomes and organizational resilience (Hanline et al., 2024). By institutionalizing reflection and collaboration as recurring professional practices, the IAP strengthens the social infrastructure necessary to sustain inclusion beyond individual classrooms. This phase lays the foundation for the next initiative, which focuses on integrating explicit bias-interruption strategies into instructional practice and professional learning systems.

Improvement Initiative 3

The third initiative of the IAP operationalizes the research on bias reduction by embedding evidence-based interruption strategies into professional learning and instructional coaching. Whereas the first two initiatives build the awareness, motivation, and reflective capacity necessary for change, this phase translates insight into consistent

action. A large body of social-cognitive and educational research demonstrates that bias is best mitigated not by isolated training events but by repeated opportunities to practice identifying, interrupting, and replacing biased thoughts and behaviors within authentic professional contexts (Cox & Devine, 2019; Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

The IAP integrates several empirically supported strategies—stereotype replacement, individuation, perspective-taking, and counter-stereotypic imaging—through guided application in early childhood settings. During coaching sessions and collaborative professional learning communities, educators analyze real classroom scenarios, examining how subtle language choices, instructional routines, or behavioral expectations may reinforce deficit-based narratives about children with disabilities. Coaches then support teachers in formulating and rehearsing alternative responses grounded in strength-based, developmentally appropriate practice. For example, when a child’s challenging behavior is framed as “noncompliance,” educators learn to reframe it through the lens of communication and environmental support, an approach consistent with universal design for learning and the Pyramid Model for social-emotional development (U.S. ED & HHS, 2023).

Instructional coaching serves as the delivery mechanism for these strategies, ensuring that bias-interruption becomes embedded in the normal rhythm of professional reflection rather than an episodic intervention. Research on early childhood coaching (Damiani, Unick, & Schultz, 2024) underscores that change is sustained when feedback is non-evaluative, collaborative, and situated within teachers’ own classrooms. Through iterative observation, modeling, and reflective dialogue, coaches help participants identify patterns of decision-making that may unconsciously limit children’s participation or access. Over time, these cycles of inquiry foster metacognitive

awareness, enabling educators to recognize bias “in the moment” and to apply corrective strategies autonomously.

Short-term outcomes of this initiative include increased teacher confidence in addressing bias-laden situations and observable shifts in classroom discourse and interactions. Long-term outcomes include the institutionalization of bias-interruption practices within ongoing professional development and coaching systems, resulting in environments where inclusive responses become automatic and habitual. Embedding these strategies within established structures of professional learning and feedback ensures that bias reduction is not treated as an ancillary topic but as an integral component of high-quality teaching. This initiative therefore bridges the individual and systemic dimensions of change, setting the stage for the final phase of the IAP, which focuses on aligning leadership practices and organizational conditions to sustain inclusion as a cultural norm.

Improvement Initiative 4

The fourth initiative of the IAP focuses on aligning leadership practices and organizational structures to ensure that inclusion becomes an enduring cultural norm rather than a temporary instructional emphasis. As the ecological literature demonstrates, administrators play a pivotal role in translating inclusive policy and professional learning into sustainable practice (Balikci, Gulboy, & Rakap, 2025; Steed et al., 2024). Leaders influence inclusion through both direct actions—such as allocating resources, modeling inclusive language, and setting expectations—and indirect mechanisms, including shaping school climate, professional development priorities, and accountability systems. Sustainable change therefore requires that leadership and

organizational supports mirror the same reflective, collaborative, and equity-oriented principles expected of educators.

In the IAP model, leadership alignment occurs through three interrelated strategies. First, administrators participate in parallel learning experiences with teaching staff, engaging in the same reflection and bias-interruption activities introduced in earlier initiatives. This approach builds shared vocabulary, transparency, and mutual understanding across hierarchical levels, reducing the disconnect between teacher practice and administrative decision-making. Second, leaders are guided to conduct an inclusion audit of existing structures—such as scheduling, staffing, data collection, and family engagement practices—to identify procedural barriers or inequities that may unintentionally reinforce exclusion. This diagnostic process is supported by tools from the ECTA Center allowing teams to establish measurable benchmarks for organizational progress. Third, leadership teams engage in collaborative action planning to integrate inclusive goals into existing continuous improvement frameworks, ensuring that accountability mechanisms reinforce, rather than compete with, the principles of access, participation, and belonging.

Research underscores that when leaders frame inclusion as both an ethical mandate and an instructional priority, staff commitment deepens and turnover decreases (Steed et al., 2024; Shen & Musyoka, 2025). Accordingly, this initiative situates leadership development within a relational model of change, emphasizing empathy, trust, and shared responsibility. Professional learning communities are expanded to include administrators, instructional coaches, and family liaisons, reflecting the distributed leadership necessary for sustaining systemic reform (ECT, 2023). The short-term outcomes of this initiative include the establishment of clear, inclusive policies and procedures that reflect equity principles. Long-term outcomes include

organizational coherence, stable leadership practices that prioritize inclusion, and a professional culture in which all members, teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, and administrators, see themselves as co-stewards of belonging.

Collectively, these four initiatives, building awareness, fostering reflection and collaboration, embedding bias-interruption strategies, and aligning leadership practices, compose an integrated improvement plan designed to bridge the gap between policy ideals and daily practice. Together they provide the framework for cultivating a sustainable culture of inclusion across early childhood systems. The following section outlines the benchmarks, measures, and evaluation strategies that will be used to assess the effectiveness of the IAP and its anticipated impact on educator practice and child outcomes.

Section 4

Benchmarks and Measurement Strategies

Inclusive education is multi-faceted, so researchers use a variety of tools to capture how well students with disabilities are included in early childhood and primary settings. These tools range from observational rating scales of classroom practices to surveys of attitudes and participation, as well as structured interviews.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the IAP requires a combination of formative and summative measures that capture change across multiple ecological levels—individual, interpersonal, and organizational. The benchmarks for success are aligned with the program’s core goals: to increase educator awareness and self-regulation of bias, strengthen reflective and collaborative professional practice, embed bias-interruption strategies within daily instruction, and establish leadership systems that sustain a culture of belonging. Consistent with improvement science and early childhood research, the measurement approach integrates both qualitative and quantitative indicators to provide a comprehensive picture of progress (Hanline et al., 2024).

Short-Term Benchmarks (0–6 months)

During the initial implementation phase, short-term benchmarks will focus on measurable changes in educator knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy related to inclusive practice. Pre- and post-intervention surveys—specifically, the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education–Revised (SACIE-R; Forlin et al., 2011) and the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2011)—will be administered to assess growth in awareness, concern, and confidence.

The SACIE-R is a 15-item questionnaire designed to quantify three interrelated dimensions of teacher outlook: sentiments (comfort in interacting with students with disabilities), attitudes (beliefs about the benefits and rights associated with inclusion), and concerns (stress or resource-related apprehensions about inclusive teaching) (Forlin et al., 2011). This measure provides insight into teachers' readiness to support inclusive practices and can help identify areas requiring additional professional development. The SACIE-R uses a Likert-type scale, typically ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The instrument demonstrates solid psychometric reliability ($\alpha \approx .83$) and has been validated across multiple cultural contexts. Although brief and efficient, the SACIE-R is a self-report measure that may be influenced by social desirability bias and does not assess specific teaching competencies (Forlin et al., 2011).

Complementing this attitudinal assessment, the TEIP scale measures teachers' self-efficacy—their belief in their capability to implement inclusive strategies effectively (Sharma et al., 2011). Grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory, the TEIP focuses on three domains of efficacy: managing behavior, using inclusive instruction, and collaborating with families and professionals. The 18-item instrument employs a 6-point Likert scale, has demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha \approx .85-.90$), and has been validated internationally across pre-service and in-service teacher populations (Sharma et al., 2011). Unlike attitude-based measures, the TEIP provides a skills-oriented indicator of readiness, reflecting whether educators feel capable of translating inclusive values into classroom practice. However, it remains a self-report measure and may not fully account for contextual factors such as policy constraints or availability of resources.

Together, the SACIE-R and TEIP offer complementary data on educators' attitudinal and efficacy-based growth during the program's early phase. Improvements across these two measures will serve as indicators of progress toward developing

reflective, confident, and competent practitioners equipped to implement inclusive early childhood and primary classroom practices.

Intermediate Benchmarks (6–12 months)

At the midpoint of implementation, data collection will emphasize behavioral indicators of change. The Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP), (Soukakou, 2016), a frequently used tool available at a nominal cost, will be used to monitor shifts in classroom climate, participation supports, and peer interaction patterns. The ICP assesses the quality of daily classroom practices that support the developmental needs of children with disabilities in inclusive preschool settings. It covers 12 dimensions of quality (e.g. adaptations, adult support, peer interactions) through an observer's ratings. The ICP is typically used with children ages 2–5 in early childhood programs. A trained observer spends time in the classroom, scoring items on a 5-point scale based on observed practices and classroom provisions. It is a validated tool – studies show it has good inter-rater reliability, internal consistency, and construct validity (e.g. ICP scores correlate with general classroom quality measures like ECERS-R). Assessors find it feasible and easy to use, and it fills gaps left by traditional quality scales by focusing specifically on supports for children with disabilities. The ICP requires trained observers and about 2–3 hours per classroom to administer, which can be resource-intensive. As an external observation, it may not capture child perceptions or outcomes directly (it measures environment quality rather than student progress).

Long-Term Benchmarks (12–24 months)

Long-term evaluation will align with federal reporting and accountability systems governing early childhood inclusion under IDEA Part C and Part B, Section 619. These

frameworks define how states document children's access to inclusive environments and serve as the national standard for measuring progress toward equitable participation for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities.

Under Part C, states are required to submit Section 618 data on the number and percentage of infants and toddlers (birth through age 2) receiving services in the natural environment, disaggregated by race and ethnicity. This information is reported annually through Indicator C2 (Settings) within the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR). Under Part B, Section 619, states collect and report Section 618 data on the number and percentage of preschool children ages 3–5 served in different educational environments, also disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and disability category. These data inform Indicator B6 (Preschool Least Restrictive Environment) within each state's SPP/APR submission. Together, Indicators C2 and B6 provide a national picture of how early childhood programs are supporting inclusion across age groups.

To support accurate and consistent reporting, the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center and the IDEA Data Center (IDC) have jointly developed federal data-reporting toolkits. These resources include guidance on IDEA Section 618 and Indicators C2 and B6, decision trees for determining appropriate reporting categories, and illustrative scenarios that promote uniform interpretation of “natural” and “educational” environments. Key tools include B6 Data Reporting Tools: Educational Environments, Ages 3–5 (2014) and Back-to-Basics on Part C Primary Settings and Part B Early Childhood Settings (2017).

These federally mandated data systems and technical tools will guide long-term evaluation benchmarks for the Inclusion Awareness Program (IAP). By aligning local evaluation measures with IDEA Indicators C2 and B6, the IAP's outcomes can be mapped directly to national definitions of inclusion—emphasizing access to natural

environments, participation in the least restrictive educational settings, and equitable opportunity for every child to learn alongside peers without disabilities.

Data Analysis and Feedback Cycles

Data analysis will employ a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Inclusion Awareness Program's (IAP) impact across time and system levels. Quantitative data from pre- and post-assessments—including the SACIE-R (Forlin et al., 2011), TEIP (Sharma et al., 2011), and Inclusive Classroom Profile (Soukakou, 2016)—will be analyzed descriptively and inferentially to identify trends in educator attitudes, self-efficacy, and classroom practices. Frequency distributions, mean comparisons, and growth analyses will be used to detect shifts in inclusion-related competencies and environmental quality across implementation phases. Longitudinal data aligned with IDEA Indicators C2 and B6 will be reviewed to monitor organizational outcomes such as access, participation, and least restrictive environment placement over time (ECTA, 2014, 2017).

Collectively, these benchmarks and measures establish a multi-tiered system of evaluation that mirrors the ecological design of the plan itself. By triangulating data across perspectives and time points, the evaluation process will not only assess the effectiveness of the IAP but also model the reflective, data-informed culture it seeks to create. The next section summarizes the anticipated outcomes and long-term implications of this plan for advancing equity, access, and belonging within early childhood education.

Anticipated Outcomes

The implementation of the IAP is expected to yield measurable changes in educator mindset, instructional practice, and organizational culture, ultimately

improving children’s experiences of access, participation, and belonging. Consistent with the literature reviewed in Section 2, these outcomes are conceived as progressive and mutually reinforcing across three levels of change: individual, interpersonal, and systemic.

Short-Term Outcomes (0–6 months)

In the early stages of implementation, participants are expected to demonstrate increased awareness of implicit bias and its influence on classroom decision-making. Pre- and post-assessment data from the SACIE-R and TEIP scales should reflect significant growth in concern for equity, self-efficacy for inclusive practices, and recognition of bias as a habitual process rather than a fixed trait (Cox & Devine, 2019; Hoffman & Winter, 2022). Qualitative reflections and PLC discussions are expected to reveal deeper professional introspection and a shift from compliance-based perspectives toward personally motivated engagement with inclusion. Observable early indicators of change include the use of more inclusive language in documentation and interactions with families, increased willingness to problem-solve collaboratively, and greater consistency in implementing strength-based approaches to behavior and learning differences.

Intermediate Outcomes (6–12 months)

By the midpoint of the implementation cycle, the integration of reflective and bias-interruption practices into daily instruction should result in more equitable and responsive classroom environments. Observational data from the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) are expected to show gains in areas related to emotional support, individualized scaffolding, and peer participation. Teachers are anticipated to

demonstrate improved capacity to identify and modify environmental or instructional barriers, leading to greater autonomy and confidence in implementing inclusive practices. At the interpersonal level, collaboration within PLCs is expected to strengthen collective efficacy—the shared belief that all educators can contribute to positive outcomes for all children (Hanline et al., 2024). Administrators participating in leadership alignment activities are expected to exhibit greater awareness of structural barriers and to implement policy or scheduling adjustments that enhance access and collaboration time.

Long-Term Outcomes (12–24 months)

Sustained implementation of the IAP should produce systemic and cultural shifts that extend beyond individual classrooms. At the organizational level, inclusive language and expectations are anticipated to be embedded in professional learning systems, performance frameworks, and improvement plans. Leaders and educators will share a common understanding of inclusion as both a moral imperative and a professional standard, reflected in consistent policies, equitable resource allocation, and data-driven reflection cycles. At the child level, improvements are expected in indicators of participation and belonging, including increased peer interaction, reduced social isolation, and more equitable teacher engagement across children with and without disabilities (Hanline et al., 2024; Watson & Newman, 2023). Over time, these changes should contribute to improved developmental and social-emotional outcomes, consistent with research demonstrating the long-term benefits of early inclusive experiences (Odom et al., 2011; U.S. ED & HHS, 2023), and IDEA Child Outcomes (ECTA, 2022).

Collectively, these anticipated outcomes represent the culmination of the IAP's purpose—to shift inclusion from an episodic professional focus to an enduring cultural practice that positively impact child outcomes. The integration of mindset, reflection,

and systemic alignment is expected to result in a sustainable model of professional learning that can be adapted across diverse early childhood contexts. The final section of this Capstone will synthesize the overall findings and discuss the implications of this improvement plan for advancing equity and belonging in early childhood education systems.

Future Work

While the current phase of the IAP is anchored in Indicator S12, subsequent implementation cycles can be expanded to address other ECTA indicators that together build a comprehensive inclusion infrastructure. For example, Indicator S3: Quality of Inclusive Programs emphasizes the alignment of instructional practices, data systems, and resources to ensure that children with and without disabilities experience meaningful participation and progress in shared environments. Integrating Indicator S3 would link awareness efforts to measurable improvements in program quality and instructional fidelity. Similarly with Indicator S5: Family Engagement, embedding family-voice components, such as co-facilitated workshops or family reflection tools, would extend the IAP's reach beyond professionals to the home and community, reinforcing the reciprocal influence among system layers envisioned in Bronfenbrenner's model. In this way, the Bias-Habit Breaking Workshop serves as the starting point in a broader continuum of systemic change.

Discussion

The IAP represents both a response to and an evolution of the field's ongoing pursuit of authentic inclusion in early childhood education. Grounded in the recognition that sustainable inclusion cannot be achieved through policy mandates or structural reform alone, the IAP addresses the cultural and psychological dimensions that shape

educators' daily decisions and relationships. By integrating evidence-based strategies for bias recognition, reflection, and interruption within the structures of professional learning and leadership, the plan operationalizes inclusion as a continuous process of awareness and adaptation rather than a static compliance goal. The anticipated outcomes outlined in this study—greater educator self-efficacy, strengthened collaboration, equitable classroom practices, and enhanced child participation—reflect a coherent, ecological approach to change.

In synthesis, this Capstone affirms that the most durable transformations occur when systems and mindsets evolve together. The IAP offers a replicable framework for building that alignment, providing educators and leaders with the tools to identify and dismantle the invisible habits of thought that perpetuate inequity. Its implementation is expected to contribute not only to improved experiences for children with disabilities but also to the creation of learning communities in which all children and adults experience belonging as a shared norm. Ultimately, the findings underscore that advancing inclusion in early childhood education requires more than technical expertise, it requires the deliberate cultivation of cultural consciousness, reflective practice, and sustained organizational commitment. By centering these principles, the IAP positions inclusion not as an initiative to be achieved, but as a defining characteristic of what it means to offer high-quality early education.

Conclusion

This capstone contributes to the growing body of scholarship that positions inclusion not merely as a placement decision, but as a cultural and moral imperative embedded within the fabric of early childhood education. By tracing the historical and policy legacies that have sustained exclusion, examining the ecological systems that mediate daily practice, and addressing the attitudinal and cognitive mechanisms that

perpetuate bias, this castone provides a comprehensive understanding of why inclusion has remained an unrealized ideal. The IAP translates this understanding into a practical framework for change—one that empowers educators and leaders to examine their assumptions, reflect on their practices, and align their systems with the principles of equity and belonging. Although the work of inclusion is complex and continuous, the evidence reviewed here suggests that transformation is both possible and measurable when mindsets and structures evolve together. Moving forward, future research should investigate the long-term effects of bias-habit interventions within diverse early childhood settings and explore how policy, preparation, and leadership pathways can further sustain the cultural shift toward genuine inclusion. By cultivating reflective, bias-aware educators and equity-minded systems, the field can move beyond compliance toward a vision of early learning that honors the dignity and potential of every child.

Implications for Research

This capstone also identifies several areas for further inquiry. Future research should examine the longitudinal effects of bias-habit interventions such as the IAP on teacher efficacy, classroom practice, and child outcomes across diverse contexts, including underrepresented and multilingual populations. Comparative studies could explore how variations in leadership engagement, community culture, and policy environments mediate the sustainability of mindset change. Mixed-methods and participatory research approaches, especially those that incorporate the voices of children and families, would further deepen understanding of how inclusion is experienced and enacted. Continued empirical investigation of these areas will be essential to advancing a comprehensive, evidence-based model of culturally sustaining inclusion in early childhood education.

Section 5

The product developed for this Capstone is the Bias-Habit Breaking Workshop (BHBW). The BHBW was designed in direct response to the identified PoP, which highlighted the persistent barriers to high-quality inclusive preschool settings created by implicit bias and deficit-oriented beliefs about children with disabilities. All content is designed to align with the ECTA Indicator S12: Public Awareness focus on shifting attitudes and beliefs through multi-sensory engagement. There is no costs as the venue for the BHBW provides the necessary equipment (e.g. projector and sound system).

Purpose and Audience

The purpose of the BHBW is to bridge the gap between policy ideals and daily practice by providing participants with an accessible, evidence-based participatory experience. The BHBW may also be adapted for use in professional development sessions, faculty meetings, and teacher preparation coursework.

The BHBW will be formally launched on April 18, 2026, at the Association of Young Children Europe (AYCE) Annual Conference. This convening of EC professionals provides the ideal platform to introduce the BHBW and accompanying installation as it brings together educators, leaders, and vendors dedicated to advancing equity and quality in early learning. By debuting the BHBW in this setting, the launch not only ensures broad practitioner engagement but also aligns the work with AYCE's mission of fostering collaboration and innovation across American military connected EC systems based in Europe.

Description of the Product

Adapted from the evidence-based work of Devine et al. (2012) and Cox (2022), the BHBW guides participants through understanding how biases form, identifying their own implicit biases, and applying strategies to interrupt biased thought patterns. The BHBW structure is framed around common misconceptions about inclusion such as “children with disabilities are too disruptive for general education classrooms” or “inclusive settings lower expectations for typically developing peers” (Sabia & Thurlow, 2022; Virginia Guidelines for Early Childhood Inclusion [VDOE], 2018).

Design Features

Visually Immersive – An installation titled *The Weight of Words* transforms misconceptions into a visceral experience of bias. Misconceptions statements are projected onto the floor, where participants walk across them while listening to the ambient sounds of children playing. This design symbolizes how bias underlies and “grounds” practice in EC education.

Interactive and Reflective – Rather than relying on lecture, the workshop BHBW emphasizes storytelling, discussion, and applied practice.

Culturally and Developmentally Responsive – Language and examples are drawn from authentic preschool settings, making the content relatable and directly applicable.

Core Components of the Intervention (the 4 key elements)

1. Introduce implicit bias and its harmful consequences
2. Spark motivation by connecting with participants’ egalitarian values
3. Provide awareness and help participants recognize bias in themselves and others

4. Teach practical, evidence-based strategies for bias reduction: stereotype replacement, perspective taking, individuation, counter-stereotypic imaging, and increased contact

Intended Outcomes

The BHBW aims to produce measurable outcomes for both educators and children. For educators, outcomes include increased self-awareness of bias, strengthened efficacy for inclusive practices, and adoption of new cognitive and behavioral strategies to interrupt biased responses. For children, outcomes include increased access to inclusive preschool settings, more equitable participation in daily learning experiences, and improved developmental and social- emotional growth.

Exhibit: The Weight of Words (Projection Installation)

Inspired by Nicola Anthony (b. 1984), a visual artist who transforms fragments of text into immersive sculptural works that surface hidden narratives, *The Weight of Words* translates literature on prevalent misconceptions about inclusion in ECE into a participatory projection projected in looping white text on a black background across the floor of the installation space. Participants walk directly over the projected words while hearing the low-level ambient sounds of children playing. The juxtaposition between the innocence of children's voices and the heaviness of misconceptions creates a powerful dissonance, reminding participants that bias underpins daily practice in unseen but consequential ways.

Table 3

Misconceptions to be projected

No.	Misconception (Myth)	Reframed Truth	Source
1	<i>Some children are too disabled to benefit from inclusion.</i>	Every child benefits when learning environments are designed for all learners.	Sabia & Thurlow (2022); Saunders & Wakeman (2018)
2	<i>Students with significant needs belong in special classrooms.</i>	Belonging begins when support follows the child, not the label.	Sabia & Thurlow (2022); VDOE (2018)
3	<i>Including children with disabilities holds other students back.</i>	Inclusive classrooms lift expectations, empathy, and achievement for everyone.	Saunders & Wakeman (2018)
4	<i>Behavior problems make inclusion impossible.</i>	Behavior is communication and inclusion works when we listen and respond with understanding.	Sabia & Thurlow (2022)
5	<i>Inclusive classrooms lower academic standards.</i>	Inclusion raises the standard of teaching, not the threshold for belonging.	Sabia & Thurlow (2022); Saunders & Wakeman (2018)
6	<i>Students must be ready before they can be included.</i>	Readiness grows through participation, not exclusion.	Saunders & Wakeman (2018); VDOE (2018)
7	<i>Therapies and IEP goals can't happen in general education.</i>	Real skills are learned in real settings.	Saunders & Wakeman (2018)
8	<i>Inclusion is too expensive and too demanding for schools.</i>	Inclusion is an investment in community capacity, not an added cost.	Sabia & Thurlow (2022)
9	<i>Students with disabilities stop progressing after a certain age.</i>	Growth is lifelong when expectations remain open and supports evolve.	Sabia & Thurlow (2022)
10	<i>Inclusion is a burden on general education teachers.</i>	Collaboration strengthens everyone, when educators share responsibility, inclusion thrives.	Saunders & Wakeman (2018)
11	<i>Inclusion is the job of special education, not the whole community.</i>	Inclusion is a shared act of humanity, one that belongs to all of us.	VDOE (2018); Sabia & Thurlow (2022)

Workshop Design: 45 Minutes

Time | Segment | Description

0–5 min | Welcome & Immersion | Participants walk the projected bias walkway with audio. Prompt: “What did you notice? How did it feel to walk on these words?”

5–15 min | Framing Bias as a Habit | Define unintentional bias, the habit model, and why it is trainable. Quick poll/partner share: “Where do you see unintentional bias in early childhood settings?”

15–25 min | Values + Motivation | Connect to educators’ egalitarian values.

Prompt: “Why did you become an early educator? How might bias get in the way of those values?”

25–35 min | Awareness + Strategies | Teach two strategies (individuation, perspective-taking) through vignettes. Small groups apply strategies to scenarios, then share back.

35–43 min | Practice & Commitment | Participants create one inclusive, strength-based belief or action step from their context. These are typed in and added to a new projection loop.

43–45 min | Closing Reflection | Project participants’ inclusive statements onto the floor. Prompt: “What is one belief you will carry forward from here?”

The BHBW represents the practitioner-facing product of this Capstone project. Rooted in evidence-based approaches, adapted for the realities of EC practice, and designed for sustainability, the IAP addresses the Problem of Practice by equipping educators to dismantle implicit bias and cultivate classrooms where every child’s potential is recognized and nurtured. The Weight of Words installation extends the framework into an immersive professional learning experience, enabling practitioners not only to confront stereotypes but to author and project their own inclusive beliefs. In doing so, the IAP supports the broader goal of moving beyond placement toward a genuine culture of inclusion in American ECE systems.

Literature Matrix

Study	Purpose / Focus	Method	Sample / Participants	Procedures	Results	Key Limitations	Connection to POP
Theme 1 – Historical and Policy Forces Shaping Inclusion Systems							
Debè et al. (2024)	Trace ideological roots of exclusion.	Historical-comparative analysis	Archival & secondary sources (Germany, Italy, U.S.)	Analyzed historical documents on eugenics and assessment evolution.	Eugenic ideology shaped classification and segregation.	Secondary sources; partial cross-national scope.	Historic sorting logics persist, curbing inclusive access.
McCabe, Rossetti, & Bennett (2020)	Interrogate LRE's role in segregation.	Critical document analysis	13 IEPs across 6 U.S. states	Coded LRE rationales via spatial framework.	Discretionary LRE language normalizes restrictive placements.	IEP docs only; lacks deliberative context.	Policy ambiguity limits inclusive placements for preschoolers.
National Council on Disability (2018)	Assess national progress toward LRE.	Mixed-methods policy analysis	Interviews/forum s + national placement data	Synthesized qualitative accounts with EDFacts trends.	Persistent segregation for ID/multiple disabilities; racial disparities.	Advocacy-network sampling; self-report.	Shows many young children remain outside inclusive settings.
NCEE / IES (2020)	Describe ECSE models/inclusion prevalence.	Cross-sectional survey	51 619 coordinators; national district sample	State/district surveys + EDFacts/CCD.	~52% of children served inclusively in districts with general preschool.	2014–15 snapshot; self-report.	Quantifies underrepresentation in inclusive preschool classrooms.
DeBruin-Parecki & Slutzky (2016)	Map inclusion/ELL supports in Pre-K standards.	Mixed methods (survey/interviews/docs)	53 leaders; 54 standards documents	Frequency summaries + NVivo coding.	Sparse, generic inclusion guidance across states.	Descriptive; policy-intent ≠ practice.	Standards gaps contribute to uneven inclusive access.
White House (2025) – Executive Order	Track federal shifts shaping inclusion.	Policy directive analysis	Federal agencies; EC/K–12 systems	Directed less disparate-impact enforcement; DEI restrictions.	Shift from effects- to intent-based	Evolving policy; limited peer review.	Potentially weakens protections that

					civil-rights enforcement.		safeguard inclusive access.
Green (2025) – NYT	Contextualize policy climate for inclusion.	Policy journalism/analysis	Synthesis of federal actions	Reported implications of enforcement shifts for schools.	Highlighted narrowing of equity tools.	Not peer-reviewed.	Frames macro-policy risks to expanding inclusive early learning.
Pudelski (2025) – AASA	Alert practitioners to compliance shifts.	Advocacy/policy commentary	District leaders	Outlined scrutiny of DEI/implicit-bias terms in compliance.	Possible chilling effect on PD content.	Opinion; non-empirical.	May deter inclusion-oriented PD, constraining access.
GAO (2025) – Head Start funds	Clarify fiscal stability risks.	Federal audit/legal analysis	HHS funding decisions; Head Start	Assessed impoundment legality of paused funds.	Found violations of Impoundment Control Act.	Legal focus; indirect classroom links.	Funding disruptions threaten inclusive options for low-income children.
von Hippel, Chor, & Lurie (2025)	Evaluate Head Start’s role in equity.	Policy analysis/review	Head Start proposals/outcomes	Synthesized evidence to evaluate elimination proposals.	Argued value; outlined harm of cuts.	Opinionated framing.	Head Start supports inclusive access; cuts risk underrepresentation.
Modan (2025) – K-12 Dive	Report workforce pipeline disruptions.	Education journalism	Teacher prep grants (CA)	Documented grant losses (residencies/credentials).	Projected pipeline impacts for high-need schools.	Not peer-reviewed; regional.	Fewer trained educators reduce capacity for inclusive preschool.
Associated Press (2025)	Contextualize operational shifts.	News report	National K–12 districts	Covered certification requirement against “discriminatory DEI”.	Raised compliance uncertainty.	Brief news; evolving policy.	May suppress inclusion-supportive PD, affecting quality of inclusion.

Theme 2 – Ecosystems as Drivers of Practice

Tobin, Wu, & Davidson (1989)	Reveal cultural foundations of pedagogy.	Comparative ethnography	Preschools in Japan/China/U.S.	Filmed classes; video-cued multivocal interviews.	Preschools transmit national cultural scripts.	Small purposive samples; translation limits.	Cultural scripts shape inclusion/exclusion attitudes.
Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa (2009)	Examine globalization's influence on ECE culture.	Comparative ethnography (revisited)	Updated sites in three countries	Replicated filming/interviews to track change.	Continuity and change in pedagogy (e.g., empathy, autonomy).	Non-representative; interpretive.	Cultural change affects how inclusion is enacted.
Tobin & Hayashi (2011)	Detail method illuminating hidden beliefs.	Methodological/analytic extension	Secondary analyses of 2009 data	Explained multivocal method; interpreted cultural logics.	Clarified how educators articulate implicit norms.	Commentary; limited primary data.	Helps unpack assumptions that impact inclusion.
Gunnestad et al. (2022)	Map values guiding ECE policy.	Cross-national document analysis	ECE policy texts in 13 countries	Thematic coding of value statements.	Convergence on rights; local divergence in priorities.	Translation/select ion bias; aspirational.	Values shape inclusive policy enactment.
Van Steen & Wilson (2020)	Quantify cultural effects on attitudes.	Meta-analysis	64 studies of teacher attitudes	Random-effects; cultural moderators (Hofstede).	Individualism predicted more positive inclusion attitudes.	Missing moderators; instrument heterogeneity.	Culture helps explain uneven inclusion adoption.
Balikci, Gulboy, & Rakap (2025)	Center leadership's role.	Systematic review	18 studies on EC administrators	Synthesized attitudes, roles, barriers, PD needs.	Supportive attitudes but resource/training constraints.	English-only; uneven quality.	Leadership gaps restrict inclusive placements.
Steed et al. (2024)	Explore admin perspectives/supports.	Qualitative phenomenology	23 administrators (one state)	Zoom interviews; open coding + member checks.	Need for funding, staff, space; mixed inclusion definitions.	Single-state; limited diversity.	Admin constraints limit inclusive availability.
Dignath et al. (2022)	Assess malleability of beliefs.	Meta-analysis	~41,000 teachers; 102 studies; 40 countries	Synthesized attitudes/concerns/self-efficacy;	Training improved beliefs;	Self-report; uneven	PD can shift beliefs needed for

				intervention effects.	field experiences strongest.	geography; few long-term links.	expanding inclusion.
Kondo et al. (2023)	Identify readiness levers.	Cross-sectional survey	89 CA preschool teachers	Analyzed training, comfort, knowledge (IEP/supports).	Training, not degree, predicted comfort welcoming children with disabilities.	Non-random; self-report.	Training gaps impede teacher confidence to include preschoolers.
Shen & Musyoka (2025)	Surface teacher support needs.	Phenomenological study	15 ECSE lead teachers	Semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis.	Isolation; para shortages; limited PD; commitment to inclusion.	Regional, small sample.	Support shortages reduce capacity for inclusive preschool.
Hanline, Eldridge, & Robbins (2024)	Synthesize what works in inclusive ECE.	Qualitative meta-synthesis	8 U.S. studies (1975–2023)	PRISMA + grounded-theory synthesis.	Access + participation yield gains; peer valuing & autonomy increase.	Limited pool; heterogeneity.	Validates benefits—supporting expansion to underrepresented children.
Huckstadt & Shutts (2014)	Examine early attitudes toward disability.	Experimental tasks	69 children (ages 3–5) in 4 preschools	Vignette, visible preference, norm-violation tasks.	Visible disability shaped liking; norms drove moral judgments.	Homogenous stimuli; limited power.	Need explicit teaching to counter early biases limiting inclusion.
Diamond & Hong (2010)	Test inclusion decision drivers.	Experimental vignette + ToM	72 children (ages 3–5) in inclusive classes	Manipulated activity demand/fairness; false-belief tasks.	Inclusion rose with low demand & fairness prompts; ToM predicted inclusion.	Hypothetical; physical disability focus.	Design cues can raise inclusion of disabled peers.
Stanton-Chapman & Schmidt (2016)	Evaluate play environment inclusivity.	Survey + open-ended	303 VA special ed professionals	Assessed playground accessibility/social participation.	Reported inadequate accessibility; social isolation.	Single-state; self-report.	Environmental barriers limit participation for young children.

Alsarawi (2024)	Understand inclusive design effects.	Qualitative interviews	11 caregivers at UD playground	Semi-structured interviews; content analysis.	Ramps, surfacing, variety facilitated social play/friendships.	Single site; caregiver reports.	Well-designed spaces can foster participation/belonging.
Pavia & Mason (2012)	Explore family decisions in public inclusion.	Grounded-theory interviews	23 U.S. parents	In-depth interviews; constant comparison.	Families manage stigma; modify venues/times; identity work.	Convenience sample; no observation.	Community barriers reduce everyday inclusion opportunities.
Watson & Newman (2023)	Elicit children's inclusive space priorities.	Child-led photo + draw-talk	26 children (3–5 yrs; 4 with disabilities)	Photo tours; pair interviews; drawings; thematic analysis.	Children emphasized friendship, safety/cleanliness, movement/privacy, authenticity.	Single site; few disabled participants.	Child voice shows what inclusive settings must provide.
Coussens et al. (2020)	Document participation experiences.	Photo-elicitation interviews	16 children (5–9) with DD (Flanders)	Week-long photo capture + interviews; inductive analysis.	Supports enable participation; barriers from activity demands.	Small regional sample; parent presence.	Supports/context mediate access—critical to inclusive preschool.
Elbaum, Perry, & Messinger (2024)	Assess tools to measure inclusion processes.	Systematic review (sensing tech)	Studies using LENA/UWB in preschools	Synthesized audio/proximity pipelines for interactions.	Peer networks and teacher speech diversity relate to language growth.	Technical demands; small, short studies.	Measurement can target supports for under included children.
Theme 3 – Fostering a Sustainable Culture of Inclusion							
Huang et al. (2023)	Quantify scope of implicit ableism.	Scoping review (PRISMA-ScR)	66 studies on implicit disability bias	Systematic search; charted measures (mostly IAT).	Consistent automatic preference for nondisabled individuals.	IAT dominance; invisible disabilities under-studied.	Adult bias leads to exclusionary decisions affecting preschool inclusion.
Bani Odeh & Lach (2024)	Map global barriers to education for CWD.	Descriptive scoping review (JBI)	54 studies; 19 countries	Coded barriers/facilitators via ICF/ecological lens.	Attitudinal/systemic barriers persisted across contexts.	HIC overrepresentation; uneven quality.	Mirrors U.S. attitudinal barriers that depress inclusive enrollment.

Skinner, Meltzoff, & Olson (2017)	Test social transmission of bias.	Experiments with preschoolers	N=148 (ages 4–5)	Viewed adult nonverbal favoritism; assessed liking/prosocial/imitation.	Children absorbed and generalized adult nonverbal biases.	Lab stimuli; ecological validity limits.	Early bias acquisition argues for proactive inclusion socialization.
Noggle & Stites (2018)	Explore benefits to nondisabled peers.	Hermeneutical case studies	3 typically developing preschoolers	54 hrs observation; interviews; artifacts analysis.	Peers gained empathy, regulation, leadership in inclusion.	Very small, homogenous sample.	Shows inclusion benefits all—supporting wider access.
Christensen, Knezek, & Norton (2023)	Surface bias and guide PD.	Simulation-based PD	40 teachers	SimSchool avatars with ELL/gender frames; analytics/tips.	Detected lower expectations for ELL labels; prompted supportive actions.	Small sample; real-world transfer unclear.	Bias-aware PD can remove barriers to inclusion.
Hoffman & Winter (2022)	Translate science into practical debiasing.	Narrative review	Bias-reduction studies (lab/field)	Synthesized strategies (awareness, individuation, empathy, contact, mindfulness).	Single tactics short-lived; multi-strategy sustained efforts stronger.	Heterogeneous measures; durability mixed.	Supports multi-strategy PL (like IAP) to reduce exclusionary practices.
Cox & Devine (2019)	Test empowerment-based model.	RCT + longitudinal follow-ups	Adults in habit-breaking program	Values alignment, awareness, strategy toolkit, sustained regulation.	Increased concern/awareness; evidence of sustained reductions and action.	Most effective for egalitarian participants.	Evidence base for IAP to shift mindsets enabling inclusion.
Cox (2022)	Advance CBT-aligned, sustained model.	Conceptual synthesis + review	Studies of habit-breaking (CBT-informed)	Empowerment/information deficit DEI; summarized outcomes.	Reported climate/hiring gains in applied contexts.	Secondary synthesis; IAT debates.	Implementation logic for durable culture change toward inclusion.

Appendices

Deep Research Prompts

What are the research tools used to measure inclusion in educational context related to students with disabilities?

Could you please clarify what level of education you're focusing on (e.g., primary, secondary, or higher education)? Also, are you interested in specific types of tools (e.g., surveys, observational checklists, interview protocols), and do you want recent tools only or also older, widely used ones?



All tools in early childhood and primary education

Great, I'll look into research tools used to measure inclusion in early childhood and primary education settings, specifically related to students with disabilities. I'll include standardized tools, observational checklists, interview protocols, and surveys—both recent and well-established—to give you a comprehensive view.

I'll get back to you with a structured summary of each tool, including its purpose, target population, strengths, and how it's used.

Research completed in 7m · 30 sources · 91 searches

 Inclusion Measurement Tools for Students With Disabilities in Early and Primary Education 

Research Tools for Measuring Inclusion in Early Childhood and Primary Education

Interactive Query

In regards to disabilities: How do shared cultural beliefs, values, norms, and expectations within American ECE systems shape the implementation of inclusive preschool practices?

Could you please clarify what specific aspect you're most interested in? For example:

- The impact of teacher beliefs and training
- Influence of family cultural values
- Role of policies and institutional norms
- Differences across racial/ethnic or socioeconomic groups
- Regional variation (e.g., urban vs rural)

This will help me provide a more focused and insightful analysis.



American culture

Thanks for clarifying. I'll explore how shared cultural beliefs, values, norms, and expectations in American society influence the implementation of inclusive practices in early childhood education (ECE) settings for children with disabilities.

I'll look at how mainstream American ideologies—such as individualism, equity, standardization, and accountability—affect classroom practices, teacher attitudes, policy enforcement, and family engagement in inclusive preschool programs.

I'll let you know once I've gathered the findings.

Research completed in 9m · 25 sources · 88 searches

Influence of American Cultural Norms on Inclusive Preschool Practices

Cultural Influences on Inclusive Early Childhood Education in the United States

Snapshot Counts

Research completed in 8m · 23 sources · 109 searches

🔍 Ableism and Cultural Contradictions in Inclusive Early Childhood Education



Ableism vs. American Ideals in Early Childhood Inclusion

Research completed in 7m · 29 sources · 142 searches

🔍 Strategies and Leadership Practices for Sustainable Inclusion in Early Childhood Education



Fostering a Sustainable Culture of Inclusion in Early Childhood Education Systems

Research completed in 9m · 26 sources · 74 searches

🔍 Historical and Policy Roots of Disability Attitudes in Early Childhood Education



Historical and Systemic Influences on Disability Inclusion in American Early Childhood Education

Research completed in 7m · 29 sources · 142 searches

🔍 Strategies and Leadership Practices for Sustainable Inclusion in Early Childhood Education



Fostering a Sustainable Culture of Inclusion in Early Childhood Education Systems

Research completed in 6m · 27 sources · 121 searches

🔍 Early Childhood Programs to Shift Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Inclusion



Transforming Beliefs for Inclusion in Early Childhood (0–5)

Research completed in 7m · 30 sources · 91 searches

🔍 Inclusion Measurement Tools for Students With Disabilities in Early and Primary Education



Research Tools for Measuring Inclusion in Early Childhood and Primary Education

Research completed in 9m · 25 sources · 88 searches

🔍 Influence of American Cultural Norms on Inclusive Preschool Practices



Cultural Influences on Inclusive Early Childhood Education in the United States

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