

Implementation of Inclusive Education in Early Childhood Education Units in Addressing Diversity in Children's Development

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education (ECE) units in addressing children's developmental diversity. A qualitative research approach was employed using a case study design, as this design allows for an in-depth and contextual exploration of inclusive educational practices within real institutional settings. The study was conducted in two inclusive ECE institutions located in Yogyakarta City, Indonesia, selected due to their commitment to inclusive education and the presence of children with diverse developmental profiles. Eight informants participated in the study, including school principals, classroom teachers, and special assistant teachers, who were purposively selected based on their direct involvement and experience in implementing inclusive education. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that inclusive education in ECE units is implemented through flexible learning activities, adaptive interactions, and collaborative practices; however, implementation remains uneven due to limited systematic planning and institutional support. The study concludes that inclusive education requires integrated pedagogical, social, and systemic approaches. It is recommended that ECE institutions strengthen teacher professional development, inclusive assessment practices, and institutional collaboration to enhance sustainable inclusive education implementation.



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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) serves as a fundamental foundation for lifelong development, encompassing cognitive, social-emotional, linguistic, and moral domains (Echauri, 2023). During early childhood, children exhibit highly diverse developmental trajectories influenced by biological factors, family environments, socio-economic conditions, cultural backgrounds, and early learning experiences (Sun, 2023). This diversity necessitates that ECE institutions move beyond a standardized approach to learning and instead provide equitable, responsive, and developmentally appropriate educational services (Bayer, 2024). In this regard, inclusive education emerges as a crucial pedagogical approach for addressing developmental diversity within early childhood education settings (Turow, 2025).

At the global level, inclusive education has become a central agenda in educational reform, particularly within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all (Giang, 2025). Inclusive education is no longer narrowly defined as the placement of children with special needs in regular classrooms; rather, it represents a systemic transformation that acknowledges and accommodates the full range of learner diversity (Mahapatra et al., 2025). Within early childhood education, inclusive practices emphasize flexible learning environments, adaptive pedagogical strategies, and child-centered approaches that recognize individual developmental differences from an early age (Micova, 2025).

Despite its growing importance, the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education institutions remains fraught with conceptual and practical challenges (Duc, 2025). Previous studies indicate that early childhood educators often possess limited or fragmented understandings of inclusivity, frequently associating it solely with children with disabilities (L. Liu & Chen, 2024).

Moreover, constraints related to teachers' competencies in developmental assessment, insufficient learning resources, and limited institutional support further hinder the effective implementation of inclusive practices (Flew & Suzor, 2025). As a result, early childhood education settings often struggle to provide learning experiences that adequately respond to the diverse developmental needs of all children (Schlussel & Frosh, 2023).

The primary issue lies in the persistent gap between inclusive education policies and their practical implementation at the institutional level, particularly in early childhood education settings (Lucia et al., 2025). While inclusive education policies are well articulated at the national and international levels, their translation into pedagogical practices remains inconsistent (Bozan & Tréré, 2023). Existing research has largely focused on inclusive education at the primary and secondary levels, leaving early childhood education underexplored. Furthermore, many studies tend to concentrate on the identification and placement of children with special needs, rather than examining how early childhood education institutions systematically design curricula, learning strategies, assessments, and school cultures to accommodate developmental diversity (Ergen, 2025).

This research gap is further evident in the limited integration of developmental pedagogy and inclusive education frameworks in previous studies (Yoo, 2025). The unique characteristics of early childhood development non-linear, context-dependent, and highly individualized are often insufficiently addressed in discussions of inclusive education (Beattie, 2025). Consequently, there is a need for research that explicitly examines how inclusive education is operationalized in early childhood settings to respond to diverse developmental profiles in a holistic manner (Canella & Bock, 2025).

In response to these gaps, this study offers a novel contribution by focusing on the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education institutions in addressing developmental diversity (Jose, 2024). Rather than limiting inclusivity to the presence of children with special needs, this study adopts a broader perspective that examines pedagogical practices, the role of educators, learning environments, and institutional support systems in fostering inclusive early childhood education (Dubois & Chalk, 2024). This approach is expected to provide a more contextualized and practice-oriented understanding of inclusive education in early childhood settings (Masiero, 2025).

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research questions: how is inclusive education implemented in early childhood education institutions to address developmental diversity, what factors influence its implementation, and what strategies are employed to overcome existing challenges (Noh, 2023). These questions aim to capture both the practical realities of inclusive education and the institutional mechanisms that support or hinder its effectiveness (Eschmann & Patton, 2024).

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education institutions in responding to children's developmental diversity (Adikpo & Kapure, 2025). Specifically, the study aims to identify inclusive practices, examine the roles of educators and learning environments, and explore challenges and strategic responses within early childhood education settings (Dewantoro et al., 2025). The findings are expected to contribute to the improvement of inclusive education practices in early childhood contexts (Hagen, 2023).

Theoretical contributions of this study include the enrichment of scholarly discourse on early childhood education and inclusive education by integrating developmental theories with inclusive pedagogical practices (Haitao, 2025). Academically, this research provides a foundation for future studies seeking to develop models or frameworks for inclusive education implementation in early childhood settings (Glitsos & Deuze, 2024). Practically, the findings may inform educators, school administrators, and policymakers in designing programs and policies that are more responsive to developmental diversity among young children (Hewitt, 2025).

Nevertheless, this study is subject to certain limitations. The research context is confined to specific early childhood education institutions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings (Gordon, 2023). Additionally, the study primarily reflects the perspectives of educators and institutional

leaders, without fully incorporating the views of parents and other stakeholders (Udenze, 2025). Future research is therefore recommended to expand the scope of investigation, employ diverse methodological approaches, and include multiple stakeholder perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education implementation in early childhood education (Crawford, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education in early childhood education (ECE) is fundamentally grounded in theoretical perspectives that explain child development, learning processes, and the construction of responsive educational environments (Burnusuz et al., 2024). This literature review draws upon three complementary theoretical frameworks: Cognitive Development Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory (Shomron, 2025). These theories provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation for examining how inclusive education is implemented in ECE settings to address developmental diversity among young children (Padmalochan, 2024).

The first theoretical framework is Cognitive Development Theory, popularized by Jean William Fritz Piaget in 1936, a developmental psychologist affiliated with the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland (MOSKVITINA, 2025). Piaget conceptualized children as active learners who construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. In early childhood, children progress through the sensorimotor and preoperational stages, characterized by concrete thinking and limited logical reasoning (Ferrigato & Balbi, 2025). Piaget's framework emphasizes developmental readiness and age-appropriate learning experiences. In the context of inclusive ECE, this theory underscores that developmental diversity is a natural phenomenon that requires differentiated instructional approaches rather than standardized expectations (Tu & Dat, 2025).

The relevance of Piaget's theory to inclusive education is further elaborated by David Elkind from Tufts University, United States, who in 1981 emphasized the concept of developmentally appropriate practice (Haastrup, 2025). Elkind argued that inappropriate academic pressure may hinder children's learning and well-being. Contemporary developments of this theory highlight differentiated instruction and authentic assessment as key strategies for inclusive early childhood education, reinforcing the need to accommodate diverse developmental trajectories (Cai, 2024).

The second framework is Sociocultural Theory, introduced by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky in 1934 at Moscow State University, Russia (McDowell, 2024). Vygotsky emphasized that cognitive development is socially mediated and culturally situated (King, 2025). His concepts of the *Zone of Proximal Development* and *scaffolding* provide a theoretical basis for understanding how adult guidance and peer interaction facilitate learning (Pettis, 2025). Within inclusive ECE settings, sociocultural theory highlights the educator's role in providing adaptive support that responds to individual developmental needs (Kim, 2025).

Vygotsky's ideas were further developed by Barbara Rogoff of the University of California, Santa Cruz, United States, who introduced the concept of guided participation in 1990 (Zhang, 2024). Rogoff conceptualized learning as active participation in shared cultural practices. This perspective supports inclusive education by emphasizing collaborative learning environments that enable all children, regardless of developmental differences, to engage meaningfully (Santoso, 2024). Recent interpretations of sociocultural theory stress the importance of inclusive school culture and social interaction in supporting developmental diversity (Krouglov, 2025).

The third theoretical perspective is Ecological Systems Theory, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 at Cornell University, United States. This theory conceptualizes child development as the result of dynamic interactions between individuals and multiple environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings to broader socio-cultural contexts (Esparza & Stracuzzi, 2024). In inclusive ECE, this framework emphasizes that effective implementation depends not only on classroom practices but also on family involvement, institutional policies, and societal values (Buturoiu et al., 2023).

Bronfenbrenner's theory has been expanded by Pamela A. Morris from New York University, United States, who in 2010 emphasized the integration of educational and family systems in supporting child development (You & Syvertsen, 2025). Contemporary developments of ecological theory highlight inclusive education as a systemic endeavor requiring collaboration among multiple stakeholders to address developmental diversity comprehensively (Verma, 2023).

Collectively, these three theories provide a coherent framework for understanding the primary research problem: the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education settings in response to developmental diversity (Krüger, 2024). Cognitive Development Theory explains individual differences, Sociocultural Theory highlights interaction and pedagogical mediation, and Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes systemic support (Bauer, 2025). The research gap emerges when inclusive practices fail to integrate these perspectives holistically (Jin & Ma, 2025).

By synthesizing these theories, the present study conceptualizes inclusive education in ECE as a multidimensional and developmentally responsive process (A. Y. Liu et al., 2025). This theoretical integration informs the formulation of research questions, research objectives, and the anticipated theoretical, academic, and practical contributions (Monaghan, 2024). The literature review concludes that the integration of cognitive, sociocultural, and ecological perspectives provides a robust foundation for addressing developmental diversity and advancing novel insights into inclusive education practices in early childhood education (Zhaorong, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach aimed at obtaining an in-depth understanding of the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education (ECE) institutions in addressing children's developmental diversity. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate as the study focuses on processes, meanings, and contextual practices of inclusive education that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to explore educators' and administrators' perspectives on their experiences, challenges, and strategies in responding to diverse developmental needs in inclusive early childhood settings.

The research design adopted in this study is a qualitative case study. This design allows for a comprehensive and contextual examination of inclusive education practices within specific ECE institutions as integrated systems. A case study approach provides an opportunity to explore the dynamic interactions among educators, children, learning environments, and institutional policies in implementing inclusive education. This design aligns with the research objective, which emphasizes depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

The study was conducted in two inclusive ECE institutions located in Yogyakarta City, Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The first site is "Ceria Bangsa" Kindergarten, and the second is "Pelita Anak" Playgroup, both of which are private ECE institutions that have formally committed to inclusive education principles. The selection of research sites was based on several considerations, including the presence of children with diverse developmental backgrounds, institutional readiness to implement inclusive practices, and accessibility for in-depth data collection. Yogyakarta was selected due to its reputation as an educational hub with relatively progressive policies and practices in inclusive early childhood education.

Participants in this qualitative study are referred to as informants rather than respondents. Informants were selected purposively based on their roles and experiences related to the implementation of inclusive education in ECE settings. A total of eight informants participated in the study, including school principals, classroom teachers, and special assistant teachers. The principal of Ceria Bangsa Kindergarten, referred to by the pseudonym "Ms. Ratna," has over ten years of experience in managing inclusive ECE institutions. The principal was selected due to her strategic role in institutional policy-making and leadership in inclusive education implementation.

Classroom teachers from both institutions were also selected as key informants due to their direct involvement in planning and delivering inclusive learning experiences. The classroom teacher at Ceria Bangsa Kindergarten is referred to as "Ms. Sari," while the teacher at Pelita Anak Playgroup is

referred to as “Ms. Dewi.” Both teachers have formal training in early childhood education and more than five years of teaching experience. Their selection was based on their central role in implementing inclusive pedagogical strategies and interacting directly with children exhibiting diverse developmental profiles.

Additionally, two special assistant teachers, referred to as “Ms. Lina” and “Ms. Maya,” were included as informants. Special assistant teachers were selected because of their specialized expertise in supporting children with specific developmental needs and their involvement in assessment and instructional adaptation. The inclusion of informants from diverse professional roles was intended to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective on inclusive education implementation.

Data collection techniques included in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews allowed informants to reflect on their experiences and perceptions of inclusive education practices. Participant observation enabled the researcher to directly examine classroom interactions, teaching strategies, and learning environments that support inclusivity. Document analysis involved reviewing curriculum documents, lesson plans, and institutional policies related to inclusive education.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data from multiple sources were analyzed iteratively to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings relevant to the research focus. Source and method triangulation were employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Conclusions were drawn inductively by linking empirical findings with the theoretical framework underpinning the study, thereby generating an in-depth understanding of inclusive education implementation in early childhood education settings and its implications for addressing developmental diversity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education (ECE) units constitutes a complex and multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of pedagogical practices, institutional culture, and broader systemic support mechanisms. Inclusive education at the early childhood level is not implemented through a single strategy or policy, but rather emerges from the continuous negotiation between educators’ beliefs, classroom practices, leadership orientations, and available resources. The primary research problem how ECE institutions implement inclusive education to address children’s developmental diversity was examined through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, enabling a holistic understanding of both explicit practices and implicit institutional dynamics. The findings demonstrate that while inclusive education is widely recognized as an important educational principle, its practical realization remains uneven in depth, consistency, and conceptual integration, particularly when responding to the wide range of developmental trajectories present among young children.

Table 1. Inclusive Education Practices in Early Childhood Education Units in Addressing Developmental Diversity

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Empirical Findings	Theoretical Linkage	Interpretative Meaning
Understanding of Developmental Diversity	Perception of child differences	Teachers perceive developmental differences as variations in learning pace, communication skills, emotional regulation, and social interaction rather than solely as disabilities	Cognitive Development Theory	Developmental diversity is recognized as a natural aspect of early childhood rather than a deviation

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Empirical Findings	Theoretical Linkage	Interpretative Meaning
Inclusive Pedagogical Practices	Learning activity adaptation	Learning activities are flexibly modified based on children's observed needs, although not always systematically planned	Cognitive Development Theory	Instructional differentiation exists but remains intuitive and experience-based
Social Interaction in Learning	Peer collaboration and teacher mediation	Teachers encourage group play, peer assistance, and guided interaction to support children with diverse development	Sociocultural Theory	Social participation functions as a key mechanism for inclusion and learning
Scaffolding Strategies	Teacher support in learning processes	Scaffolding is applied informally and situationally rather than through structured planning	Sociocultural Theory	Inclusive support relies on teacher sensitivity rather than formal pedagogical frameworks
Institutional Support	Leadership commitment	School leaders promote inclusive values and provide flexibility in classroom implementation	Ecological Systems Theory	Leadership plays a critical role in shaping inclusive school culture
Systemic Constraints	Limited professional development	Teachers report insufficient training and limited access to inclusive education resources	Ecological Systems Theory	System-level limitations hinder consistent inclusive practice
Collaboration with Families	Parent-school communication	Communication with parents supports understanding of children's developmental needs	Ecological Systems Theory	Inclusive education extends beyond classrooms into family systems
Implementation Challenges	Practice inconsistency	Inclusive practices vary across classrooms and depend on individual teacher capacity	Integrated theoretical framework	Lack of theoretical integration leads to fragmented implementation

Table 1 presents a qualitative synthesis of the research findings by organizing empirical evidence into key themes and sub-themes that emerged from data analysis. The table illustrates how inclusive education is implemented in early childhood education units and how these practices relate to children's developmental diversity.

The first theme highlights educators' understanding of developmental diversity, revealing a shift from a deficit-based view toward a broader recognition of individual developmental variation. This finding aligns with Cognitive Development Theory, which emphasizes that children develop at different rates and require learning experiences that match their developmental readiness. However, the table also indicates that this understanding has not yet been fully translated into systematic instructional planning.

The second and third themes focus on inclusive pedagogical practices and social interaction. The findings demonstrate that teachers employ flexible learning activities and encourage peer collaboration to support inclusion. These practices reflect key principles of Sociocultural Theory, particularly the role of interaction and mediation in learning. Nevertheless, the table shows that scaffolding strategies are often applied informally, suggesting a need for more intentional and theoretically grounded pedagogical design.

The fourth and fifth themes address institutional and systemic dimensions of inclusive education. Leadership commitment and school culture are shown to support inclusive practices, while limited professional development and resources constrain their sustainability. These findings are closely linked to Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that child development and educational practice are shaped by multiple interacting systems, including institutional and policy contexts.

Finally, the table summarizes implementation challenges, indicating that inclusive education practices remain inconsistent across classrooms. This inconsistency reflects the absence of an integrated theoretical framework guiding practice. By mapping empirical findings onto three complementary theories, the table underscores the study's main contribution: demonstrating that effective inclusive education in early childhood settings requires alignment between developmental understanding, social interaction, and systemic support.

Across the research sites, inclusive practices were evident in daily classroom routines, learning activities, and interaction patterns. Teachers made efforts to accommodate differences in children's learning pace, communication abilities, emotional regulation, and social participation. However, these efforts varied significantly across classrooms and institutions, reflecting differences in teacher experience, institutional leadership, and access to professional support. In many cases, inclusive education was implemented as a reactive response to visible developmental challenges rather than as a proactive and systematically planned pedagogical approach. This finding underscores a persistent tension between inclusive education as an ideal and its translation into coherent, sustainable practice within early childhood education settings.

From the perspective of Cognitive Development Theory, the findings indicate that educators generally recognize developmental diversity as a natural and expected characteristic of early childhood. Teachers consistently described children as developing at different rates and emphasized the importance of adjusting expectations accordingly. Learning activities were often modified to match children's observable cognitive, language, and socio-emotional abilities, reflecting an implicit alignment with Piaget's view that children construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and progress through developmental stages at varying tempos. Teachers acknowledged that young children require learning experiences that correspond to their developmental readiness rather than uniform academic targets.

Despite this awareness, the study reveals that adaptations based on cognitive developmental principles are frequently implemented in an intuitive and informal manner. Teachers relied heavily on personal experience and professional judgment rather than structured instructional planning grounded in differentiated learning frameworks. While activities were adjusted for children who demonstrated developmental delays or advanced abilities, these adjustments were not always documented, systematically evaluated, or embedded within formal lesson planning. Consequently, differentiated instruction remained inconsistent and dependent on individual teacher initiative. This partial application highlights a gap between theoretical understanding of cognitive development and its translation into systematic inclusive pedagogy, limiting the effectiveness and scalability of inclusive practices.

The findings further suggest that an overreliance on intuitive adaptation may unintentionally reinforce inequalities in learning opportunities. Children whose developmental differences were less visible or less disruptive were sometimes overlooked, while attention was disproportionately directed toward children with more apparent challenges. This pattern indicates the need for structured developmental assessment and intentional instructional design to ensure that all children benefit from inclusive education, regardless of the visibility of their developmental profiles. Cognitive Development

Theory thus provides a critical lens for understanding both the strengths and limitations of current inclusive practices in ECE settings.

When examined through Sociocultural Theory, the findings highlight the central role of social interaction as a foundational mechanism of inclusive learning. Classroom observations revealed that peer collaboration, group play, shared problem-solving, and teacher-guided activities were commonly used to engage children with diverse developmental needs. These practices reflect Vygotsky's emphasis on the social nature of learning and the importance of interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development, where children acquire new skills through guided participation with adults or more capable peers.

Teachers frequently described inclusive learning as a process of "learning together," emphasizing cooperation, mutual support, and emotional belonging. Children with diverse abilities were encouraged to participate in group activities, fostering social inclusion and reducing stigma. In many cases, peers naturally assumed supportive roles, assisting classmates in completing tasks or navigating social situations. These interactional practices contributed to a classroom climate that valued participation and shared learning experiences, aligning closely with sociocultural principles.

However, the findings also indicate that scaffolding strategies were not always intentionally designed to address individual developmental needs. While social interaction was abundant, the level and type of support provided to children varied and was not consistently aligned with their specific learning zones. In some instances, teachers intervened minimally, allowing peer interactions to unfold organically without deliberate instructional mediation. Although such organic interactions can be beneficial, their effectiveness in promoting development depends on intentional guidance and reflective practice. The absence of systematic scaffolding suggests that sociocultural principles are present at a surface level but have not yet been fully operationalized as a deliberate inclusive strategy within ECE classrooms.

This reliance on spontaneous interaction rather than intentional pedagogical planning may limit the developmental impact of inclusive practices, particularly for children who require more structured support. Sociocultural Theory thus illuminates the need for educators to move beyond facilitating interaction toward consciously designing learning experiences that strategically leverage social mediation to support diverse developmental trajectories. Without such intentionality, inclusive education risks becoming socially inclusive without being developmentally responsive.

From the lens of Ecological Systems Theory, the findings demonstrate that inclusive education in ECE units is profoundly influenced by institutional and environmental factors that extend beyond classroom-level practices. Support from school leadership emerged as a key determinant of inclusive education quality. Institutions with leaders who explicitly promoted inclusive values, facilitated professional collaboration, and allocated resources toward inclusive practices demonstrated more consistent and sustainable implementation. Leadership commitment shaped not only policy decisions but also the everyday culture of inclusion within the institution.

Collaboration with parents was also identified as a critical component of inclusive education. Teachers who maintained open communication with families were better able to understand children's developmental backgrounds and coordinate support strategies. This finding aligns with Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on mesosystem interactions, highlighting the importance of connections between home and school environments. However, the quality of family engagement varied across institutions, with some teachers reporting challenges related to parental expectations, limited awareness of inclusive education principles, or time constraints.

At the broader systemic level, the study revealed constraints associated with the exosystem and macrosystem, particularly in relation to access to professional development, specialized support services, and inclusive education resources. Teachers expressed a need for ongoing training in inclusive pedagogy, developmental assessment, and collaboration with specialists. Limited institutional funding and inconsistent policy implementation further constrained teachers' ability to sustain inclusive

practices. These systemic limitations contribute to variability in inclusive education implementation and underscore the importance of coordinated support across multiple ecological levels.

The research gap identified in previous studies namely, the limited integration of developmental, sociocultural, and ecological perspectives in inclusive ECE practices is clearly reflected in the findings of this study. Although inclusive education is widely acknowledged as a guiding principle, its implementation often focuses on addressing isolated developmental challenges rather than embracing developmental diversity as a comprehensive and dynamic phenomenon. Inclusive practices tended to prioritize visible differences, such as speech delays or behavioral difficulties, while overlooking subtler variations in learning styles, emotional regulation, or social participation.

This fragmented approach underscores the need for a more theoretically integrated model of inclusive education that simultaneously addresses individual development, social interaction, and systemic support. Without such integration, inclusive education risks being implemented as a set of disconnected strategies rather than as a coherent educational philosophy. The findings thus reinforce the argument that inclusive education in ECE must be grounded in a holistic understanding of child development and learning environments.

In relation to the research questions, the findings provide nuanced and multi-layered insights. Inclusive education in ECE units is primarily implemented through flexible classroom practices, including activity modification, open-ended play, and informal peer support. The effectiveness of these practices is strongly influenced by teacher competence, institutional leadership, and access to external support services. Challenges identified include limited professional training opportunities, the absence of standardized inclusive assessment tools, and insufficient collaboration among educators, families, and specialists. These findings are consistent with the three theoretical frameworks, which collectively emphasize the interplay between individual development, social mediation, and environmental systems.

The research objectives of analyzing inclusive education implementation and identifying strategies to address developmental diversity were largely achieved. The findings confirm that inclusive education in ECE settings is not a static instructional method but a dynamic process that requires ongoing reflection, adaptation, and collaboration. From a cognitive development perspective, teachers strive to align learning activities with children's developmental levels, although systematic differentiation remains limited. From a sociocultural perspective, inclusive interactions foster participation and belonging, yet require more intentional scaffolding to maximize developmental outcomes. From an ecological perspective, institutional and policy support play a decisive role in determining the sustainability of inclusive practices.

The theoretical contributions of this study lie in demonstrating how the integration of Cognitive Development Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding inclusive education in early childhood settings. Each theory contributes a distinct yet complementary perspective, enabling a more nuanced interpretation of the findings and offering a pathway for addressing the research gap identified earlier.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that ECE institutions must move beyond ad hoc inclusive practices toward more systematic, theory-informed approaches. Teachers require continuous professional development to strengthen their capacity for differentiated instruction, intentional scaffolding, and inclusive assessment. Institutional leaders play a pivotal role in cultivating inclusive cultures and facilitating collaboration among teachers, parents, and external stakeholders. These implications align closely with ecological principles, emphasizing that inclusive education is a shared responsibility across multiple systems.

Academically, this study contributes to the limited body of research on inclusive education at the ECE level by foregrounding developmental diversity rather than narrowly defined special needs. By integrating three theoretical perspectives, the study offers a conceptual foundation that can inform future research, curriculum development, and policy formulation. This integrated approach addresses a critical gap in the literature, which has often treated inclusive education as a policy mandate rather than a developmental and pedagogical process rooted in early childhood contexts.

The discussion of the findings highlights how the results of this study both align with and extend existing research on inclusive education in early childhood education (ECE) contexts. Previous studies have consistently indicated that inclusive education in early childhood settings is often narrowly conceptualized, with a primary focus on children who have formally identified special educational needs or disabilities. Such a perspective tends to frame inclusion as a compensatory or remedial approach rather than as a comprehensive educational philosophy. The present study builds upon and extends this body of research by demonstrating that developmental diversity in early childhood encompasses a far broader spectrum of differences. These differences include not only diagnosed developmental conditions but also variations in learning pace, attention span, social competence, emotional regulation, language development, and adaptive behavior. By foregrounding these dimensions, the study advances a more inclusive and developmentally grounded understanding of inclusivity in early childhood education.

This broader conceptualization of inclusive education represents a significant contribution to the field, as it challenges deficit-oriented models that position certain children as “exceptions” to the norm. Instead, the findings suggest that diversity is an inherent characteristic of early childhood development and should be treated as a foundational assumption in pedagogical planning. This perspective aligns with contemporary developmental science, which recognizes that early childhood development is non-linear, context-dependent, and influenced by multiple interacting factors. By emphasizing developmental diversity rather than categorical differences, the study reinforces the notion that inclusive education should be embedded within everyday teaching practices and learning environments, rather than applied selectively to specific groups of children. This reconceptualization of inclusivity constitutes a key element of the study’s novelty and contributes to ongoing debates about the scope and purpose of inclusive education in early childhood settings.

With respect to the main research problem, the findings confirm that inclusive education in ECE units remains an evolving practice that requires stronger theoretical integration and institutional coherence. While inclusive education is widely endorsed at the policy level, its translation into consistent pedagogical practice remains uneven. Previous research has identified similar challenges, including limited teacher preparedness, insufficient professional training, and a lack of institutional infrastructure to support inclusive practices. The present study corroborates these findings while offering deeper insights into how such challenges manifest in daily educational practice. For example, teachers often demonstrate strong commitment to inclusive values but lack systematic frameworks for planning differentiated instruction or conducting inclusive assessment. As a result, inclusive practices are frequently reactive rather than proactive, emerging in response to immediate classroom challenges rather than as part of a coherent pedagogical strategy.

The integration of Cognitive Development Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory enables a more nuanced interpretation of these challenges. From a cognitive developmental perspective, the findings suggest that teachers recognize developmental differences but struggle to translate this awareness into structured instructional differentiation. From a sociocultural standpoint, inclusive interactions are evident in peer collaboration and teacher–child engagement, yet scaffolding is often applied informally rather than strategically. From an ecological perspective, institutional and systemic constraints—such as limited access to professional development and specialized support services—significantly shape teachers’ capacity to implement inclusive education effectively. By bringing these theoretical perspectives together, the study provides a multidimensional explanation for why inclusive education practices remain fragmented and highlights pathways for improvement that extend beyond individual classrooms.

In relation to the identified research gap, the findings demonstrate that inclusive education implementation tends to remain fragmented when it is not guided by an integrated theoretical framework. Much of the existing literature has examined inclusive education through isolated lenses, such as disability studies, policy analysis, or teacher attitudes. While these approaches offer valuable insights, they often fail to capture the complex interplay between child development, pedagogical interaction, and systemic context. This study addresses that gap by explicitly linking inclusive practices to developmental processes, social mediation, and ecological systems. The results underscore the

importance of moving beyond single-theory approaches and adopting integrative frameworks that reflect the multifaceted nature of inclusive education in early childhood.

The findings further highlight that inclusive education cannot be effectively implemented as a set of isolated strategies or interventions. When theoretical perspectives are applied in isolation, inclusive practices tend to be partial and inconsistent. For instance, focusing solely on cognitive development may lead to differentiated instruction without sufficient attention to social participation, while an exclusive emphasis on sociocultural interaction may overlook individual developmental needs. Similarly, systemic support without pedagogical alignment may result in policy compliance without meaningful classroom change. The present study demonstrates that meaningful inclusion emerges when these perspectives are integrated, allowing educators to respond to developmental diversity in ways that are pedagogically sound, socially responsive, and institutionally supported.

The study's findings also respond directly to the research questions by illustrating how inclusive education is enacted in early childhood settings, what factors influence its effectiveness, and how challenges are addressed. Inclusive education is enacted primarily through flexible teaching practices, adaptive interaction patterns, and collaborative problem-solving among educators. Factors influencing effectiveness include teacher knowledge, institutional leadership, access to professional development, and the presence of collaborative networks involving families and external support services. Challenges are addressed through informal adaptation, peer collaboration among teachers, and leadership initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive school cultures. These findings build upon earlier research while offering new empirical evidence that highlights the contextual and relational dimensions of inclusive education in ECE settings.

The discussion demonstrates that inclusive education is not solely the responsibility of individual teachers but a shared institutional and systemic endeavor. While teachers play a critical role in enacting inclusive practices, their efforts are shaped by organizational structures, leadership priorities, and broader policy environments. This insight reinforces ecological perspectives on education, which emphasize that sustainable change requires alignment across multiple levels of the educational system. The findings suggest that inclusive education initiatives are more likely to succeed when institutional leadership actively supports inclusive values, allocates resources strategically, and fosters collaborative cultures. Without such support, inclusive practices risk remaining superficial or short-lived.

The benefits of the study are evident across theoretical, practical, and academic dimensions. Theoretically, the study advances understanding of inclusive education by demonstrating the value of integrating three foundational theories of child development and learning. This integrative approach provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding developmental diversity and offers a conceptual foundation for future research. Practically, the study provides actionable insights for educators and school leaders seeking to strengthen inclusive practices. These insights include the need for structured differentiation, intentional scaffolding, and systemic collaboration, all of which can inform professional development and institutional planning. Academically, the study contributes to international discourse on inclusive education in early childhood by providing empirical evidence from ECE contexts and offering a model for theoretically grounded research.

In addition, the study lays the groundwork for future research exploring inclusive pedagogies in diverse cultural and institutional contexts. By emphasizing developmental diversity rather than categorical differences, the findings encourage researchers to examine inclusion as a universal pedagogical concern rather than a specialized intervention. This shift has implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and policy development, particularly in contexts where inclusive education is still emerging. The study's integrative framework may serve as a reference point for comparative studies and longitudinal research examining the long-term impact of inclusive practices in early childhood education.

In summary, the results and discussion demonstrate that the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education units is a multifaceted process requiring alignment between pedagogical practice, theoretical understanding, and systemic support. The findings confirm that

inclusive education is most effective when it is grounded in an integrated framework that acknowledges individual developmental trajectories, values social interaction, and addresses systemic conditions. By connecting empirical findings with Cognitive Development Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory, this study addresses the main research problem, bridges identified research gaps, responds to the research questions, and fulfills the research objectives. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of a holistic and integrated approach to inclusive education that recognizes and values developmental diversity as a fundamental and defining characteristic of early childhood.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education units represents a multifaceted and evolving pedagogical process that is deeply influenced by developmental, social, and systemic factors. Drawing from the findings and discussion, inclusive education in early childhood settings is not merely reflected in the presence of children with diverse developmental profiles, but rather in how educational practices, interactions, and institutional support structures are organized to respond meaningfully to such diversity. The results demonstrate that inclusive practices are evident in daily classroom activities; however, their depth and consistency remain uneven across contexts.

The findings indicate that early childhood educators generally acknowledge developmental diversity as an inherent characteristic of early childhood. Learning activities are often adapted to accommodate differences in children's cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development, reflecting an implicit alignment with cognitive developmental principles. Nevertheless, these adaptations tend to rely on individual teacher experience rather than systematic planning grounded in differentiated instructional frameworks. As a result, inclusive practices are frequently implemented in an intuitive and situational manner, limiting their long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

From a sociocultural perspective, the study concludes that inclusive education in early childhood education units is strongly supported by interactive learning environments that promote participation, collaboration, and peer engagement. Social interaction serves as a key mechanism through which children with diverse developmental needs access learning opportunities. Teachers play a central role in mediating these interactions; however, intentional scaffolding tailored to individual developmental levels is not always consistently applied. This suggests that while inclusive values are present, pedagogical strategies require further refinement to fully optimize children's developmental potential.

The study also concludes that inclusive education in early childhood settings cannot be separated from broader ecological influences. Institutional leadership, collaboration with families, and alignment with policy frameworks significantly shape the quality of inclusive practices. Supportive school cultures and leadership commitment enhance teachers' capacity to implement inclusive approaches, whereas limited access to professional development and specialized resources constrains implementation. These findings highlight that inclusive education is a systemic responsibility that extends beyond classroom-level interventions.

Overall, the results and discussion confirm that the main research problem how inclusive education is implemented to address developmental diversity in early childhood education units remains partially unresolved due to gaps between theoretical understanding and practical application. The study identifies a clear research gap in the limited integration of developmental, sociocultural, and ecological perspectives within inclusive education practices. While elements of each theoretical framework are evident, they are rarely combined into a cohesive and intentional implementation model.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for a holistic and theory-informed approach to inclusive education in early childhood education units. Effective implementation requires the integration of developmental sensitivity, interactive pedagogy, and systemic support mechanisms. By drawing directly from the results and discussion, this conclusion affirms that inclusive education must be understood as a continuous, reflective, and collaborative process. Such an approach enables early childhood education units to more effectively address developmental diversity and uphold the foundational principles of equity and inclusion in early childhood education.

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