

# Chapter 1

## Perspectives on Inclusion in Early Childhood

**Lindsay Michelle Schofield**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6753-4988>

*United Arab Emirates University, UAE*

**Rachel Takriti**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7920-3198>

*United Arab Emirates University, UAE*

**Emma Pearson**

*United Arab Emirates University, UAE*

### ABSTRACT

*Traditionally, early childhood education and special education needs policy developments have held a low status in national and international political agendas. However, over the recent decade, there has been an intense surge of political interest at international and national levels. This surge has resulted in an unprecedented number of educational policy reforms, policy documents, and opportunities for practice to develop and respond to these changes. Due to the considerable international interest in early childhood, paralleled with similar international interest in inclusive policies, this chapter aims to examine the way early childhood care and education (ECCE), early childhood education and care (ECEC), and/or early childhood education (ECE) policy shapes the attitudes and actions of those working with babies and young children. The chapter will open by introducing early childhood provision in the international context before moving to inclusion, defining inclusion, assumptions, attitudes, perceptions, and including children.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Children come into the world burning to learn. They are naturally curious, naturally playful, and they explore and play in ways to teach them about the social and physical world to which they must adapt (Gray, 2013, p. 71).*

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Despite increasing understanding, internationally, around the importance of including children and families from diverse backgrounds, such as gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, home languages; children's health, behaviour, learning needs or disabilities; communities and family structure, families' religious affiliation and immigration status within early childhood programs and provision, ECEC/ECCE/ECE settings potentially hold immense inequality. This may occur in both direct and non-direct ways through notice and display boards, parent communication, curriculum planning, teaching, learning and caring resources, use of language and labels, adult interactions and the implementation of early childhood provision policies. As such, the driving force behind this chapter is to think about early childhood inclusive policies as statements of philosophies, accountability and a strategy with intent towards making a difference relating to matters of principles and practices for babies and young children across an array of cultural contexts.

Evidently, inclusive practice in early childhood is seen as beneficial for all children. For example, early intervention techniques designed and developed for children with disabilities and special needs are useful in enhancing the development of all children (O'Brien, 2002, p. 2). This chapter provides a baseline point of reference on perspectives on inclusion and inclusive pedagogies in early childhood in the context of ECCE/ECEC/ECE programs and provision in general for practitioners, educators, teachers, professors, educational researchers, administrators, leaders and policy-makers alike, and for early childhood studies students at undergraduate and graduate levels.

## **Early Childhood Provision**

From the outset of this chapter, it is important to point out that internationally the period of what is considered 'early childhood' somewhat differs slightly and therefore the concept of Early Childhood Care and Education, Early Childhood Education and Care and/or Early Childhood Education provision and expectations may also differ (OECD, 2014). For example, early childhood is generally accepted as the period from birth to eight years of age (NAEYC, 2009), with Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (pre-Kindergarten) attending to babies and young children from birth to the age of four and Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Kindergarten) attending to young children from ages four years to the age of compulsory education. It is also important to mention here the term 'educaring'. This term exists in early childhood discourse alongside the terms ECCE, ECEC and ECE when referring to the provision of babies and young children. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States of America (USA), the early childhood period is defined as being from birth to eight years of age, whereas in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia (AUS) the early childhood period is defined as birth to five years of age; with the very early age range of birth to four, by necessity, characterised as care more than education. As such, when referring to early childhood provision in the international context not only does the terminology differ (pre-school, community care, in-home care, nurseries, learning centres, before and after-school provision, reception and kindergartens) so does the compulsory school age and expectations of those individuals working with babies and young children. For example, in Denmark, children typically start compulsory school at the age of six and a high proportion of children attending preschool (three to five years). In 2007, 96% of children between the ages of three to five and 84% of children aged six to nine were enrolled onto early childhood programs (Statistics Denmark, 2008). Similar in the UAE, early childhood education serves birth to four years, with Kindergarten 1 and 2 attending to ages four and five and Cycle 1 covering ages six to eleven years (Ministry of Education, 2018); according to Federal Law, No 11, the compulsory school age for children is six years (Ministry of Education, 2021).

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