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# Editorial: Advancing research on inclusion and engagement in early childhood education and care (ECEC) with a special focus on children at risk and children with disabilities

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## KEYWORDS

**inclusion, engagement, early childhood education and care, children with disabilities, children at risk (CAR)**

## Editorial on the Research Topic

[Advancing research on inclusion and engagement in early childhood education and care \(ECEC\) with a special focus on children at risk and children with disabilities](#)

This topic focuses on inclusion and engagement in ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care). Inclusion is characterized by participation, determined by attendance and engagement predicting children's development, learning, and wellbeing. Educational inclusion is defined in terms of providing meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities for all children alongside their friends and peers in their local Early Childhood Education and Care-system. Engagement has been broadly defined as the amount of time a child interacts with the environment in a way that is developmentally and contextually adequate and can be a key component in identifying children in need of special support. For children with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds, high-quality inclusive environments potentially serve as a protective mechanism promoting child engagement and resiliency. Previous studies point to that inclusion in high quality ECEC in early years is a way to prevent later problems in school especially for children at risk from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The nine articles from researchers in three European countries and the US cover four themes, i.e., classroom strategies and practices for inclusion, interventions for inclusion, children's behavior and skills in relation to engagement and learning, and preschool teachers' skills, perspectives and opinions related to inclusive practices. The studies have different aims and are focused on the child's behavior in the classroom, strategies to promote and facilitate inclusion, interaction between teachers and children and between children, peer-based interventions, opinions of preschool teachers on inclusion, and tools and programs for improving inclusion. The studies are diverse in relation to aims, methods and results but have a common agenda in the ambition to increase inclusion in ECEC and point to challenges in this endeavor.

How inclusion is portrayed depends on the context. In some articles there is a focus on the skills and behavior of the individual child, whereas others emphasize the child-group socioeconomic aspects in relation to engagement and learning. The concept of engagement, sometimes in terms of the related construct participation, is central in all studies even if a definition is missing in some. The topic approaches strategies, interventions and practices aimed at increasing inclusion through promoting engagement in ECEC environments. The studies often have a multi-dimensional approach considering both structural aspects and process qualities of inclusion.

An important issue when talking about inclusion is “who are the children at risk and with special needs.” For example in Sweden there is a universal full-day ECEC system welcoming all children to the preschool in their close neighborhood, and there are very few special schools. This means that all children are in focus when discussing inclusion, not only children with disability or at risk for other reasons. In the US the situation is more diverse, where children with disabilities can attend specialized programs, and children with mild difficulties such as speech or language delay or developmental delay often are welcome in public pre-k classrooms, and programs like Head Start often give priority to children at risk. In both countries children with another mother-tongue tend to attend regular preschool or kindergarten. Since structural factors regulate the ECEC-systems the possibilities for inclusive practices may be very different in different countries, creating a challenge in drawing general conclusions about inclusion. The context always needs to be described in a very careful and comprehensive way in studies of inclusion.

Many of the authors describe the background to the study through an extensive picture of previous research about inclusion and engagement. Some authors refer to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model as a foundation for their studies in a general way. As it comes to research methods there is a large variation. The designs of the studies on engagement and inclusion vary. There are cross-sectional designs, multiple sample studies, single subject studies, explorative studies focusing on child characteristics in relation to classroom behaviors, and one study has a longitudinal design. Four studies use day-long observations in the classroom with behavior counts, other studies are based on video-observations, rating scales, interviews, and many studies use mixed methods.

This topic has shown that in spite of differences in structures of the ECEC-systems in different countries it seems to be a difficult task for teachers in ECEC to provide an inclusive classroom attending to the whole child-group and at the same time provide special support and attention to children in need of such support. It is also evident that the dynamic interactions between the teachers and the children is one of the key elements of inclusion as well as interaction between the children in the inclusive classroom. Two

of the studies looked at teacher’s opinions on inclusive practices and tools for developing an inclusive classroom. Those studies confirm that inclusion of children with disabilities and at risk is a challenge. Teachers need to be able to identify all children who need emotional and educational support and adapt instructions and the organization of the classroom for all children. It seems like children who are quiet and do not ask for attention do not receive support to the same extent as children who are active and demanding and disturb the group. Teachers need to reflect on how their own behavior and on how their proximity influences the engagement of children differently and on the type of support they provide when being close to the children.

To conclude, this topic highlights the need for professional development and new knowledge focusing on inclusion and inclusive practices. Both teacher education and in-service training need to increase focus on inclusive practices to provide all children with a high-quality preschool education. Even if there is a general acceptance for inclusion teachers need time, basic and extended education, increased knowledge and tools to work with the creation of an inclusive classroom in ECEC. Another conclusion is that more interventions studies and longitudinal studies are needed to advance the knowledge on the effects, feasibility, and sustainability of interventions for inclusion in ECEC.

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