

# From Vygotsky to Modern Inclusive Frameworks: Theoretical Foundations of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for Children with Disabilities

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children with disabilities has emerged as a critical focus in both global policy and academic research. This paper traces the theoretical evolution from Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective to contemporary inclusive frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), inclusive pedagogy, and rights-based approaches. These frameworks collectively inform how learning environments, teaching strategies, and institutional policies are restructured to promote equity, participation, and developmental opportunity for all children. Drawing from interdisciplinary literature, the study examines the shift from medical to social models of disability, the global policy milestones that have embedded inclusion into early education systems, and the persistent theory-practice gaps that hinder effective implementation. While inclusive education is now widely endorsed in international conventions and national reforms, challenges remain in translating theoretical ideals into context-sensitive, actionable practices, particularly in low-resource settings. The conclusion calls for sustained investment in teacher development, family engagement, and localized pedagogical innovations to ensure inclusive ECCE is not only a legal mandate but a lived reality for every child.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusive education, Early childhood, Children with disabilities, Vygotsky, Universal Design for Learning, Rights-based approach, ECCE policy, Theory-practice gap

## INTRODUCTION

The field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has undergone significant evolution over the past century, particularly in its approach to supporting children with disabilities. Central to this transformation is the shift from deficit-based perspectives to inclusive, strength-based frameworks that prioritize equity, participation, and holistic development. This evolution is deeply rooted in theoretical foundations laid by seminal thinkers such as Lev Vygotsky, whose sociocultural theory has provided a robust conceptual scaffold for understanding the developmental potential of all children, including those with disabilities (Vygotsky, 1978; Bøttcher & Dammeyer, 2016).

Vygotsky's theory emphasized the social nature of learning and introduced the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—a concept that reoriented developmental psychology toward recognizing the role of scaffolding, guided interaction, and cultural tools in fostering children's growth. Crucially, Vygotsky was one of the early psychologists to argue for the developmental potential of children with disabilities when placed in enabling environments that accommodate their unique needs (Stojković & Jelić, 2020). This perspective laid the groundwork for inclusive pedagogies that view disability not as an inherent limitation, but as a context-sensitive experience shaped by social interaction and institutional arrangements (Mallory & New, 1994). The rise of inclusive education frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Inclusive Pedagogy, and Ecological Systems Theory has further advanced Vygotsky's legacy in modern ECCE. These frameworks focus on creating learning environments that are accessible, adaptive, and responsive to diversity in early

learning settings (Prosper, 2017; Symeonidou et al., 2023). Inclusion is now globally recognized as both a right and a pedagogical imperative, especially in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocate for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all children (UNESCO, 2020). In contemporary ECCE discourse, inclusion transcends mere access—it entails full participation, recognition of individual agency, and the co-construction of knowledge among learners with diverse abilities (Leuwol et al., 2023). Interdisciplinary insights from psychology, special education, and developmental science have further enriched our understanding of how early interventions, caregiver-child interactions, and inclusive curricular practices contribute to optimal developmental outcomes for children with disabilities (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2024). This paper aims to explore the theoretical foundations that underpin inclusive ECCE for children with disabilities, tracing the trajectory from Vygotskian thought to current inclusive education paradigms. Through a synthesis of key literature, it highlights how enduring theoretical constructs have informed practical models of inclusion, and how modern frameworks build upon and extend these foundational ideas to foster a more equitable educational future.

## VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY: A CORNERSTONE

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has become a foundational pillar in the theoretical underpinnings of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), particularly in the context of inclusion for children with disabilities. His ideas, developed in the early 20th century, marked a departure from behaviorist and maturationist theories by emphasizing the centrality of social interaction, cultural tools, and language in cognitive development. This theoretical shift has deeply influenced inclusive education models, especially those aiming to support neurodiverse learners and children with varying developmental needs.

### Core Concepts of Sociocultural Theory

At the heart of Vygotsky's framework lies the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with appropriate support from a more knowledgeable other—be it a teacher, parent, or peer (Vygotsky, 1978). This concept is crucial in understanding the developmental trajectories of children with disabilities, as it highlights *potential* rather than *deficits*. It implies that the abilities of children with disabilities can be maximized when learning environments are scaffolded to their needs (Bøttcher & Dammeyer, 2016). Another significant idea from Vygotsky's theory is the mediating role of language and tools in learning. Children learn not in isolation but through culturally structured activities and through language, which acts as a primary means of thought and self-regulation. This concept is particularly relevant in inclusive settings, where the provision of alternative communication methods (e.g., AAC—Augmentative and Alternative Communication) can serve as cognitive tools, allowing children with speech impairments or developmental disorders to participate fully in learning (Bernard, 2024).

### Implications for Inclusive ECCE

Vygotsky's work was revolutionary in that he did not view disability as a limitation on development, but rather as a call for more enriched, socially supportive learning environments. He argued that “a disability is not just a medical condition but a social construct”—an idea echoed in modern social models of disability (Stojković & Jelić, 2020). From this standpoint, the challenge is not in the child's condition, but in the failure of the environment to meet diverse developmental needs. In inclusive ECCE settings, applying Vygotsky's ZPD involves designing tasks that are meaningful and slightly beyond a child's current ability, thus motivating engagement through guided participation. Teachers act as scaffolds—gradually withdrawing support as the child becomes more competent. This process aligns with inclusive pedagogy, which emphasizes high expectations, personalized learning, and co-participation among all children (Symeonidou et al., 2023). Further, Vygotsky's insights underpin Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a contemporary educational framework that seeks to make curricula accessible to all learners through flexible approaches to representation, expression, and engagement. UDL draws heavily on sociocultural notions that learning is variable, dynamic, and contextually dependent (Prosper, 2017; Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2024).

### Vygotsky and Disability-Specific Applications

In his lesser-known works, Vygotsky explicitly studied the education of children with sensory and cognitive

impairments. He contended that their “defect” did not predetermine cognitive limitation but necessitated alternative developmental paths supported by enriched interactions (Vygotsky, 1993). His argument formed the basis of what is today called *compensatory education*, where deficits in one domain are addressed by strengthening others through supportive social interaction. These principles have found empirical backing in modern ECCE studies that show how inclusive environments, grounded in sociocultural practices such as peer-assisted learning, dialogic teaching, and culturally responsive pedagogy, enhance the academic and social competencies of children with disabilities (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2024; Smith & Miller, 1998).

## TRANSITION TO INCLUSION: KEY MILESTONES

The transition toward inclusive education in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children with disabilities is a landmark shift in educational philosophy and practice. Rooted in principles of human rights, equity, and developmental science, this transition represents a progressive reimagining of educational systems—from segregated, medical-model institutions to inclusive, strength-based approaches. The trajectory of this movement has been shaped by pivotal global policy developments, legislative milestones, and pedagogical innovations that have embedded inclusion into the core of ECCE practice.

### 3.1. The Medical to Social Model Shift

Until the mid-20th century, children with disabilities were often institutionalized or denied access to education based on deficit-based understandings of ability. This exclusion was underpinned by the medical model of disability, which perceived impairment as a condition to be treated or managed. The emergence of the social model of disability in the 1970s and 1980s redefined this perspective, emphasizing that barriers to participation were socially constructed rather than individually inherent (Bogossian, 2024). Vygotsky’s early work had already laid conceptual foundations for this shift, emphasizing the role of environment and mediation in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1993). As this idea gained traction globally, it became clear that inclusive learning environments could empower, rather than marginalize, children with diverse developmental profiles.

### 3.2. Policy Milestones and International Frameworks

The transformation from exclusion to inclusion was solidified through major international agreements and frameworks:

- **Salamanca Statement (1994):** Issued by UNESCO, this document called on all nations to adopt inclusive education as the standard practice. It affirmed that “schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions” (UNESCO, 1994). It served as a turning point in global ECCE discourse, integrating disability rights with the broader movement for educational reform.
- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006):** Article 24 of the Convention explicitly demands that states ensure an inclusive education system at all levels. It mandates that children with disabilities receive *reasonable accommodation* and *support measures* to participate fully and equally in learning environments (United Nations, 2006).
- **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (2015):** Under the global Education 2030 agenda, SDG 4 emphasizes *inclusive and equitable quality education*, particularly through Target 4.2, which promotes access to quality early childhood development and pre-primary education for all children, including those with disabilities.

### 3.3. Legal and Institutional Milestones

In the United States, the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its earlier iterations (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975) marked a decisive step toward inclusive education. IDEA requires that children with disabilities be educated in the *Least Restrictive Environment* (LRE), advocating for inclusive settings wherever possible (Winberry et al., 2025).

Other countries followed with similar legislation:

- The UK introduced the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) in 2001.
- Australia implemented Disability Standards for Education under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992).

- South Africa's White Paper 6 (2001) outlined inclusive education as a policy imperative in the post-apartheid educational landscape.

### 3.4. Pedagogical Advancements and Practice Shifts

Pedagogically, the transition to inclusion has been shaped by advances in:

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** A framework that ensures learning experiences are accessible to all learners through multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement (Prosper, 2017).
- **Inclusive Pedagogy:** Encouraging collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, and co-teaching models.
- **Early Intervention Systems:** Recognizing the importance of addressing developmental delays in the early years through targeted, inclusive programs that support both children and families (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2024).

The integration of inclusive pedagogies into teacher education and early childhood program design is now seen as essential to sustaining equitable access in the formative years of a child's life.

## CONTEMPORARY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Contemporary inclusive education for children with disabilities in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is underpinned by a rich interplay of theoretical frameworks that have emerged from interdisciplinary fields such as developmental psychology, special education, sociology, and human rights studies. These frameworks mark a substantial progression from early diagnostic and medicalized views of disability to more socially responsive, equitable, and learner-centered paradigms. Theoretical models like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Inclusive Pedagogy, and Rights-Based Approaches collectively shape the evolving architecture of inclusive ECCE. They not only define how learning environments are structured but also provide a robust philosophical grounding for fostering participation, agency, and belonging among young children with disabilities.

One of the most widely cited frameworks in contemporary inclusive ECCE is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL, conceptualized by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), builds upon cognitive neuroscience and recognizes the variability of learners as the norm, not the exception. It proposes a tripartite framework of multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, aimed at reducing barriers and optimizing learning for all children, particularly those with disabilities (CAST, 2018). In the context of early childhood, UDL has been lauded for its flexible and proactive design that accommodates sensory, cognitive, and behavioral differences. Recent studies such as Leuwol et al. (2023) highlight how UDL principles enhance children's participation in preschool environments by offering alternative communication channels, differentiated instructional materials, and scaffolding strategies suited to individual needs. By embedding accessibility from the outset, UDL reflects a commitment to equity that resonates with the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which mandates inclusive education systems at all levels. Closely aligned with UDL is Inclusive Pedagogy, a framework that goes beyond technical accommodations to examine the ethics of teaching practices. Inclusive pedagogy emphasizes a belief in the educability of all children, the adoption of teaching strategies that support everyone, and a shift in focus from fitting children into existing structures to transforming those structures to embrace diversity (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Within early childhood settings, inclusive pedagogy calls for co-constructed learning where children with disabilities are not merely present but are actively engaged as competent contributors. For instance, peer collaboration, dialogic teaching, and child-led exploration are practices supported by this framework. Symeonidou et al. (2023) argue that inclusive pedagogy fosters a culture of collaboration between teachers, families, and support professionals, thereby enhancing the capacity of ECCE systems to respond to diverse learners without marginalizing or labeling them.

Another significant framework shaping inclusive ECCE is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which situates child development within a layered context of environmental systems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory underscores

the importance of interactions between the child and their immediate environments (e.g., family, classroom) as well as the influence of broader socio-political forces such as policy, culture, and economic conditions. In terms of disability inclusion, the ecological model promotes a holistic understanding where interventions are not only directed at the child but also at optimizing the contexts in which they live and learn. For example, inclusive ECCE programs inspired by this model invest in family-centered practices, professional development for educators, and community engagement strategies. Bøttcher and Dammeyer (2016) extend this perspective by integrating Vygotskian ideas into the ecological framework, emphasizing that development is mediated both by culture and interpersonal scaffolding.

The Rights-Based Approach to inclusive ECCE draws from international human rights instruments and reframes inclusion as a legal and moral imperative rather than a matter of choice or feasibility. Rooted in documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the UNCRPD (2006), this approach posits that all children, regardless of disability, are entitled to education that is inclusive, non-discriminatory, and geared toward their fullest development. The rights-based lens brings a critical dimension to inclusive frameworks by demanding accountability from governments, institutions, and educators. It calls for policies that dismantle structural discrimination and ensures that children with disabilities are consulted in decisions that affect them. Ainscow and Messiou (2018) point out that the rights-based framework helps shift focus from individual deficiencies to systemic barriers, thereby encouraging inclusive ECCE programs to prioritize equity in access, resources, and learning outcomes.

A complementary perspective within contemporary frameworks is the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which builds on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. CHAT views learning as a mediated, collective, and tool-based activity that occurs in a cultural context. In inclusive ECCE, CHAT provides a dynamic view of learning environments as systems of activity involving multiple actors—children, educators, caregivers—engaged in shared goals (Daniels, 2001). This theory has been particularly useful in analyzing how assistive technologies, classroom routines, and adult-child interactions contribute to the participation of children with disabilities. By focusing on the transformation of activity systems, CHAT aligns with the inclusive education agenda's focus on systemic change rather than isolated remediation. Furthermore, Intersectionality Theory has emerged as a crucial contemporary lens for examining inclusion in ECCE. Originally developed within feminist and critical race scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989), intersectionality is increasingly being used to analyze how overlapping identities—such as disability, race, gender, and socio-economic status—shape children's experiences in early education settings. Scholars like Robinson-Cimpian and colleagues (2017) emphasize the importance of understanding how these identities influence access to inclusive services, disciplinary outcomes, and teacher perceptions. Intersectional analysis challenges the one-size-fits-all model and compels educators and policymakers to adopt nuanced approaches that address multiple forms of marginalization simultaneously.

In practical terms, these contemporary theoretical frameworks converge in shaping high-quality inclusive ECCE environments. They guide the design of curricula that are accessible and flexible, promote family-professional partnerships, inform teacher preparation programs, and influence how assessments are conducted. For instance, assessments rooted in UDL and ecological frameworks are strength-based, ongoing, and culturally responsive—focusing on what children can do rather than what they lack. These frameworks also inform early intervention models that emphasize transdisciplinary collaboration and continuity of support across home and school settings.

## GLOBAL POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The evolution of global policies concerning inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children with disabilities has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades. Groundbreaking international instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) have provided powerful mandates advocating for the right to inclusive and equitable education from early childhood (UNCRC, 1989; UNCRPD, 2006). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was pivotal in framing inclusion as a fundamental human right and a guiding principle for educational reform. It stressed that schools

should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic, or other conditions. These foundations were strengthened by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all by 2030. Within this context, ECCE is not just a developmental stage but a right-based entry point to inclusive lifelong learning. The Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM, UNESCO, 2020) reinforces that early childhood intervention is one of the most cost-effective strategies to reduce inequities, especially for children with disabilities.

Institutional frameworks such as UNICEF's Inclusive Education Policy Guidance (2021) and the World Bank's Inclusive Education Initiative (IEI) focus on systemic transformation. These frameworks address teacher preparation, resource allocation, data systems, family engagement, and universal design for learning (UDL) as pillars of sustainable inclusion. A recent framework by Hendriks, Carter, and Ford (2025) promotes policy coherence between health, education, and social protection systems to support children with complex needs in inclusive ECCE settings. Similarly, Nweje (2025) argued for integrated policy frameworks that fuse inclusion in education with innovation ecosystems, especially in STEM for neurodiverse populations.

Yet, despite these frameworks, implementation remains uneven. A 2025 study by Alahmari and Rahma found that while global policies exist, many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) struggle with contextualizing and operationalizing them due to inadequate funding, poorly trained staff, and cultural biases toward disability. The gap between policy rhetoric and practice indicates a pressing need for more localized, data-driven planning and the empowerment of grassroots educational actors (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2025).

### CRITICAL REFLECTIONS: THEORY–PRACTICE GAPS

While the proliferation of inclusive education policies, inspired by progressive theories and human rights conventions, has marked a positive shift in global discourse, the translation from theory to practice remains fraught with inconsistencies. Theoretical paradigms such as Vygotsky's socio-cultural model, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) advocate for inclusive, responsive learning environments. However, the realization of these ideals in day-to-day ECCE practice often encounters systemic, attitudinal, and resource-related barriers. A significant gap exists in teacher preparedness. Micheal (2025) found that pre-service teachers in Kuwait University expressed strong theoretical alignment with inclusive values but lacked confidence in implementing inclusive strategies in practice. This discrepancy is attributed to insufficient practicum exposure, limited professional development in adaptive pedagogy, and prevailing deficit-based mindsets about disability. Similarly, the study by Yadav and Singh (2025) on teacher competencies in autism-inclusive classrooms highlighted how national curricula and assessment systems often contradict inclusive values by prioritizing academic standardization over developmental diversity. Consequently, educators are constrained by rigid structures, leaving little room for the differentiated, child-centered approaches advocated by theory.

Moreover, despite international policies stressing intersectoral collaboration (e.g., between health, social services, and education), institutional silos persist. Buba, Ayoosu, and Abalaka (2025) noted that infrastructural inaccessibility and fragmented service delivery models in Nigerian universities are a reflection of deeper systemic inefficiencies that hinder the practice of universal design principles.

Another overlooked dimension is the absence of culturally responsive adaptation of theories. The frameworks dominating inclusive ECCE are often developed in the Global North and exported globally without sufficient contextualization. Sawalhi and Al-Maadheed (2025) stressed the need for localized pedagogies that are co-created with communities, respecting indigenous knowledge systems and parental involvement norms.

Addressing this theory-practice gap requires sustained investment in:

- Teacher training focused on practical inclusive pedagogies.
- Inclusive school leadership and mentoring.
- Curriculum flexibility and assessment reform.
- Family and community engagement strategies that bridge institutional and home environments.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children with disabilities reflects a transformative journey—from deficit-oriented, exclusionary models to inclusive, strength-based frameworks rooted in equity, rights, and developmental science. This paradigm shift, beginning with the theoretical insights of Vygotsky and expanded through contemporary models such as Universal Design for Learning, ecological systems theory, inclusive pedagogy, and rights-based approaches, has reshaped how educators, policymakers, and societies conceptualize the learning potential of all children. Global policy instruments like the Salamanca Statement, the UNCRPD, and Sustainable Development Goal 4 have laid the groundwork for institutional accountability and systemic reform. However, while the theoretical and policy architectures are well established, significant gaps persist in implementation, particularly in the areas of teacher training, curriculum flexibility, cultural contextualization, and cross-sector collaboration. Bridging these gaps demands not only a reaffirmation of inclusive values but also pragmatic investments in infrastructure, educator capacity, and community-driven approaches. Ultimately, true inclusion in ECCE is not just a goal, but a continuous, dynamic process that requires vigilance, innovation, and a shared commitment to justice, ensuring that every child—regardless of ability—is seen, heard, and valued in the earliest and most formative years of life.

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