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Inclusion practices in early childhood education in the United States – a case study

The article examines inclusion practices in early childhood education in the United States through a qualitative instrumental case study conducted in an inclusive preschool in Colorado. The study explores how inclusion is implemented and experienced by teachers, parents, and administrators, emphasizing its relational, spatial, and ethical dimensions. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document review, and analyzed thematically within the interpretive framework of Maria Mendel's pedagogy of the common place. Findings indicate that inclusion is supported by interdisciplinary teamwork, family involvement, and evidence-based programs such as Anti-Bias Education, the Pyramid Model, and RULER. The preschool promotes belonging and collaboration among children, yet remains an "island of inclusion" accessible mainly to families with financial and cultural resources. This raises concerns about systemic inequalities and the fragility of private inclusion models. Drawing on Mendel's perspective, the analysis highlights that true commonality and social justice require systemic continuity, public support, and sustained cooperation between preschools, universities, and local communities. Inclusion, while effectively realized in the studied setting, still depends on broader educational and social structures that determine who can truly belong.

Key words: inclusion, early childhood education, disability, pedagogy of the common place, qualitative case study

Edukacja włączająca w amerykańskiej edukacji przedszkolnej – studium przypadku

Artykuł analizuje praktyki inkluzyjne w edukacji przedszkolnej w Stanach Zjednoczonych, opierając się na jakościowym studium przypadku przeprowadzonym w inkluzyjnym przedszkolu w Kolorado. Celem badania było zrozumienie, w jaki sposób inkluzja jest realizowana i doświadczana przez nauczycieli, rodziców i administratorów, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jej wymiarów relacyjnych, przestrzennych i etycznych. Dane zebrano za pomocą obserwacji uczestniczącej, wywiadów częściowo ustrukturyzowanych oraz analizy dokumentów, a następnie poddano analizie tematycznej na podstawie koncepcji pedagogiki miejsca wspólnego Marii Mendel. Wyniki wskazują, że inkluzję wspiera interdyscyplinarny zespół, zaangażowanie rodzin oraz stosowanie programów opartych na dowodach, takich jak Anti-Bias Education, Pyramid Model i RULER. Placówka sprzyja współpracy i poczuciu przynależności, jednak pozostaje „wyspą inkluzji" – dostępną głównie dla rodzin dysponujących zasobami finansowymi i kulturowymi. Analiza ukazuje

napięcia między ideałami równości a realiami strukturalnymi edukacji prywatnej. W duchu koncepcji Mendel podkreślono, że trwała inkluzja wymaga systemowej ciągłości, wsparcia publicznego oraz współpracy przedszkoli, uczelni i społeczności lokalnych na rzecz tworzenia prawdziwie wspólnych i dostępnych przestrzeni edukacyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: inkluzja, edukacja przedszkolna, niepełnosprawność, pedagogika miejsca wspólnego, jakościowe studium przypadku

Introduction

Every child, including those with disabilities, has the right to participate in mainstream education in the United States, a right guaranteed by one of the most significant pieces of American legislation – the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education 2025). To ensure effective and meaningful inclusion – beneficial both for children requiring extensive support and for their peers without such needs – educational practices should adopt as naturalistic approach as possible, beginning in the earliest stages of a child's development (NAEYC 2009; Movahedazarhouligh 2024). Early childhood represents a critical period for social and cognitive development; thus, early inclusion becomes a powerful means of fostering empathy and pro-social attitudes (NAEYC 2009; Movahedazarhouligh 2024).

As an au pair caring for a boy with Angelman Syndrome in California between 2014 and 2016, I developed a deep interest in inclusive education and its broader implications for the social participation of children with extensive support needs. This experience inspired me to explore various programs and to seek out inclusive centers, kindergartens, and schools in search of models and guidance for my future work as a special education teacher. I found myself immersed in a different educational world – one that had long been striving for inclusion and was equipped with a range of tools to translate the idea of inclusive education into practice. From this experience, the concept for the present research emerged. Perhaps somewhat idealistically, I hoped not only to learn from and be inspired by diverse initiatives, but also to examine a specific case of inclusive education in the United States and its lived practice.

Policy and Program Background in the United States concerning inclusion and early childhood education

Special education in the United States is founded primarily on the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA 2004), which builds upon two key twentieth-century acts – the *Rehabilitation Act* (1973) and the *Civil Rights Act* (1964) (Depart-

ment of Education, International Affairs Staff 2005). Both of these acts affirm that no individual should be discriminated against on the basis of ability, race, skin color, or ethnicity (Department of Education 2004).

IDEA is widely regarded as a *bill of rights* for individuals with extensive support needs within the educational context. The Act establishes six fundamental components that define and guarantee the right to education in the United States (Gargiulo, Bouck 2019):

1. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) – ensures that all students receive a free, public, and appropriately adapted education corresponding to their individual needs, reflecting a "zero reject" philosophy. This provision includes access to related educational services, such as occupational therapy.
2. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) – guarantees that students are educated in the most natural and inclusive environment possible, alongside their peers, while addressing their specific needs.
3. Individualized Education Program (IEP) – requires the creation of an individualized plan for every child with a disability, enabling systematic monitoring of educational progress and developmental growth.
4. Procedural Due Process – ensures parents' rights to confidentiality, access to their child's educational documentation, and participation in placement and IEP decisions.
5. Nondiscriminatory Assessment – mandates that assessments be free of cultural, linguistic, or racial bias and that they be conducted by a aqualified, multidisciplinary team. A single evaluation is insufficient for determining an appropriate educational plan.
6. Parental Participation – obliges schools to include parents as active and holistic partners in all educational decisions concerning their children.

Under IDEA, thirteen categories of disability are recognized: *autism spectrum disorder; deaf-blindness; developmental delay; emotional disturbance; intellectual disability; multiple disabilities; hearing impairment (including deafness); orthopedic impairment; other health impairment; specific learning disability; speech or language impairment; traumatic brain injury; and visual impairment (including blindness)*.

At the federal level, programs addressing children from birth to five years of age ensure that each child and their family have access to an *Individualized Family Service Plan* (IFSP), which focuses on family resources, priorities, and needs (Gargiulo, Bouck 2019; Hossain 2012). Early support is divided into two main program types (Gargiulo, Bouck 2019; Hossain 2012):

– Early Intervention (EI) – designed for infants and toddlers up to two years of age, providing specialized services to support children with developmental delays or those at risk of such delays.

– Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) – intended for children aged three to five, offering tailored educational and therapeutic services that correspond to their individual developmental needs.

As stipulated by IDEA, children of all abilities are entitled to participate in education on an equal basis. To realize this principle, early childhood centers across the country implement a range of inclusion-oriented programs, including:

– Anti-Bias Education (ABE) – an approach developed by Derman-Sparks and Edwards, based on Freire's concept of the *practice of freedom* (Lin, Lake, Rice 2008), which teaches children to understand diversity and to view the world through an anti-biased lens (National Association for the Education of Young Children 2019). Its four main goals are:
    1. Each child demonstrates self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identity.
    2. Each child expresses comfort and joy in human diversity, uses accurate language to describe differences, and builds deep, caring human connections.
    3. Each child recognizes unfairness, can articulate why it is unfair, and understands that unfairness causes harm.
    4. Each child develops empowerment and the skills to act – individually or collectively – against prejudice and discrimination (Derman-Sparks, Edwards 2010; Escayg 2019).
– The Pyramid Model – a multi-tiered framework of evidence-based practices designed to promote children's social and emotional development and to prevent or address challenging behaviors (Hemmeter et al. 2016). It consists of three levels, supported by a strong foundation of workforce competence and systemic policy implementation (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations 2025):
    1. *Universal Promotion* – universal supports for all children, including high-quality environments and nurturing, responsive relationships.
    2. *Secondary Prevention* – targeted social-emotional strategies designed to prevent emerging behavioral difficulties.
    3. *Tertiary Intervention* – individualized and intensive interventions for a small number of children with persistent challenges.
– The RULER Program – an evidence-based approach to *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)* developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. The program aims to enhance emotional understanding, emotional intelligence, and positive school climate (Yale Child Study Center 2025). The acronym *RULER* represents the five core skills: *Recognizing* emotions in oneself and others; *Understanding* their causes and consequences; *Labeling* emotions with precise vocabulary; *Expressing* them appropriately; and *Regulating* emotions effectively (Brackett et al. 2012).

All of these initiatives share a commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and evidence-based, high-quality educational practice (Movahedazarhouligh 2024). Evidence-based approaches extend beyond inclusive settings themselves to address specific developmental and learning needs – for example, the *National Professional Development Center* (NPDC) framework identifies evidence-based practices for Autism Spectrum Disorder (NPDC 2020).

Maria Mendel's Pedagogy of the Common Place

According to Maria Mendel, the *common place* is a social, pedagogical, and cultural concept encompassing physical, symbolic, and emotional dimensions. Within this framework, place and its pedagogical context are rooted in the fundamental category of *reciprocation* – a dynamic relation in which human beings shape a place, while the place, in turn, nurtures and influences human beings. It both enables and constrains human agency (Mendel 2017).

Mendel conceives the *pedagogy of the common place* as a pedagogy that refers to multiple and shifting locations – fluid and context-dependent – yet consistently oriented toward democratic commonality and the cultivation of shared goals (Mendel 2006; 2017). It is concerned with relationships and mutualities among people, realized through democratic dialogue (Mendel 2017). The *common place,* to which Mendel refers, serves as a space for cultivating *commonality*, a sphere of encounters where principles of equity and social justice are enacted. Such a place may take the form of a city, a school, or a preschool.

The *common place* is not only socially but also historically entangled; it is embedded in the educational culture of a city and in the processes that have shaped it. Mendel argues that the highest standard of education should be guaranteed by the public system and warns against the ongoing privatization of education, which she interprets as a new form of educational segregation. Commonality arises among parents, teachers, and researchers who recognize the *fragility of the public good*. Mendel perceives the creators of common places as *clashing opponents* – not as adversaries seeking to destroy one another, but as participants in a productive confrontation that sustains the social fabric (Mendel 2017; Rutkowski 2017).

In this sense, a school or preschool can be understood as a space of pedagogical encounter and negotiation, where students, teachers, parents, and administrators engage in the process of constructing genuinely common spaces for all. Within such a *common place*, schools promote the engagement of parents, teachers, and students, as well as reciprocal connections between educational institutions and local communities. As Mendel (2019) observes, *"The school community, being an expression of difference, stabilizes itself as a diversity-filled local unity".*

Methodology of the Qualitative Case Study and Overview

Research Aim and Design

This study aims to explore how inclusion is implemented and experienced within an early childhood education setting in the United States, with particular emphasis on its relational, spatial, and ethical dimensions. Focusing on a private inclusive preschool in Colorado, I seek to examine how everyday routines, pedagogical strategies, and institutional structures contribute to the educational participation of all children – especially those with disabilities or extensive support needs. To achieve this, I adopted a qualitative case study design, specifically an instrumental case study (Stake 2009).

The key analytical categories guiding this study included: *inclusion, preschool education, disability, diversity, and the pedagogy of the common place*.

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. How are inclusive practices implemented and sustained in the everyday life of the preschool?
2. How is inclusion perceived and experienced by parents, teachers, and administrators?
3. What are the broader societal implications of inclusion and inclusive practices?

Research Context

The case examined in this study is an inclusive, non-public preschool located in a metropolitan area in Colorado. The institution has been operating for over twenty years and explicitly identifies inclusion as a core element of its mission. The preschool is situated in a well-connected area, easily accessible by car from neighboring districts. Approximately 20% of enrolled children are identified as having disabilities – including autism spectrum disorder, developmental delays, and social-emotional challenges.

The preschool is organized into age-based groups, ranging from 6 months to 4–5 years. Each group consists of approximately twenty children and three dedicated teachers who work exclusively within that age cohort. Each year, children transition to a new group and begin working with a different teaching team, supporting developmental continuity and social adaptability.

Participants and Data Collection

Informants for this case study included administrators, teachers, parents, and inclusion specialists who formed part of the preschool's multidisciplinary inclusion team. The team comprised professionals such as occupational therapists, ABA therapists, speech therapists, and special education teachers.

Data collection consisted of two weeks of participant observation (I maintained detailed field notes) at the preschool in April 2023 – one week with the 4–5-year-old group and one week with the 3–4-year-old group – complemented by semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators, as well as a review of documents.

As a special education researcher with prior experience in inclusive setting, my role in the field was not only an observer but as well a reflective participant.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent key stakeholders perspectives, central to the preschool's inclusion process: a parent as a family experience, a teacher in a context of pedagogical practice and an administrator in a perspective of a system-level view.

All participants took part voluntarily and provided informed consent. They were assured of confidentiality and granted access to the study's findings.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006), guided by the research questions and the conceptual framework of Maria Mendel's pedagogy of the common place. Field notes, interview transcripts, and documents were organized into broader thematic categories (inclusive practices, stakeholder perspectives, institutional collaboration). Patterns and discrepancies across data sources were compared to ensure interpretive depth and coherence.

Participant Characteristics

1. Teacher – Early Childhood Educator with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, over ten years of experience in the field, employed at the preschool since 2018.
2. Parent – Stay-at-home mother (formerly employed in a large corporation) of a four-year-old boy with a developmental delay, residing in the same city as the preschool.
3. Administrator – Special and Early Childhood Education Specialist with over ten years of experience in the field.

Findings of the Study

To address the research questions comprehensively, the findings are organized around key thematic areas, beginning with Inclusive Practices.

Inclusive Practices

The foundation of the preschool's approach is interdisciplinary teamwork within the inclusion team, which consists of early childhood teachers, therapists, social workers, administrators, and the principal. The team meets weekly to discuss current issues, review students' progress, and collaboratively address emerging challenges. These meetings take the form of *group supervision*, allowing for reflection and shared decision-making.

Teachers, drawing on the recommendations and reflections from the inclusion team, incorporate daily routines that promote independence and cooperation. Most children do not have assigned one-on-one aides, a deliberate strategy to prevent overdependence on adults and to support full participation in the peer group. Consequently, teachers focus on facilitating and moderating social connections among children, while maintaining an appropriate level of adult presence. The teaching staff remain flexible – each teacher works with all children rather than being assigned to a specific student. When additional support is needed, an ABA specialist or paraprofessional assists the child during selected activities. Teachers use motivation and reinforcement strategies with all students.

Daily routines are consistent across groups and include circle time (often centered on social and emotional topics), outdoor play, naptime, free play, and academic sessions.

Aligned with the implementation of *Anti-Bias Education*, *The Pyramid Model*, and *RULER*, both teachers and specialists prioritize children's social and emotional development before academic achievement. Emphasis is placed on cooperation and inclusion, encouraging children to interact, work, and play with everyone. Respectful and inclusive language is intentionally modeled – not only when discussing disability, but also when addressing identity and difference. All children are referred to as *friends*, reinforcing belonging and positive relationships within the preschool community.

For children requiring additional support, individual therapy sessions are provided, including speech therapy and ABA interventions. Small social skills groups, facilitated by a social worker, bring together children who either experience social-emotional difficulties or demonstrate exceptional social competence and can serve as peer models.

The physical environment is carefully organized to promote collaboration and skill development in all aspects of daily life – from group activities to shared meals. Each classroom is divided into specific functional areas such as the *Listening Center*, *Book Nook*, *Dramatic Play Corner*, and *Mathematics Corner*. In addition, every classroom includes quiet spaces or sensory corners designed for children who may become overstimulated.

Stakeholders' Perspectives on Inclusion

The interviews with the three stakeholders – a parent, a teacher, and an administrator – reveal distinct yet interconnected perspectives on inclusion. Although their experiences differ, a coherent picture emerges: one that reflects both the promise and the tensions of inclusion, resonating with Maria Mendel's pedagogy of the common place.

– **The Parent: Belonging and Emotional Safety**

The mother emphasized her son's sense of belonging, emotional safety, and acceptance, describing how his bright and engaging personality was warmly received by peers and staff alike:

> *„He's comfortable at school (…). I mean, he's gotten some really sweet friends, wonderful support. (…) Everyone loves him".*
>
> *„I feel like he is just as comfortable at school and an unfamiliar scene. Yeah. Um, because of his personality? Yes… He's very capable, he has a very bright personality. There's a reason why they call him Mister Magical".*
>
> *"(…) School is a very inclusive place".*

– **The Teacher: Building Inclusive Culture and Awareness**

The teacher, by contrast, focused on creating an inclusive classroom culture rooted in mutual respect, identity affirmation, and community-building:

> *„I think for me, like, as an early childhood educator, my biggest role is making sure that I'm creating the most inclusive environment for all of the children and that every child who comes through my classroom feels accepted, welcomed, and celebrated for who they are. You know, we're not just going to accept who they are, but we're actually going to honor and celebrate what you bring to this classroom and building that community so that each child feels like they are a member and that they have value".*

She also reflected on the importance of broadening social awareness and public understanding of inclusion:

> *"…I think the big thing is awareness. I think when people in the community aren't aware or they make assumptions. And I think that it can lead to not the best. (…) It just leads to various questions that they're learning and growing as well. And so I think a lot of awareness needs to be*

raised, in general here year round. About our preschool, about the ways that we are inclusive and how children learn and differences and abilities".

According to the teacher, the preschool's role extends beyond its own walls:

"I think as a whole, though, there's a very positive view of students with intellectual disabilities. Um, you know, when they come to our preschool, they know that they're coming to an inclusive environment. And I think that's a piece of it is you want your child to be exposed to children of all abilities, all, um, families. And that's a piece of it. When you sign on to come to us is that portion. So I think as a whole majority, if not all the families are very, um, accepting and welcoming of it. It's just I think there's still some more awareness that can be can be".

Yet she also pointed out structural limitations:

"And even here in Colorado our preschool is only one of a handful, in the city area that, um, is inclusive. You know, there's many preschools around and daycares that, um, you know, they, they don't have children with special needs. And they, they will, um, if they enroll them and they show any differences, um, or struggles, they will remove that child from their program. And so it's a very difficult thing, um, to find an inclusive environment".

– **The Administrator: Systemic Inequalities and Fragility of Inclusion**

The administrator offered a systemic perspective, reflecting on the broader educational landscape and the limitations of privately run inclusion models:

„…certainly, the educational systems, need to continue to reflect on supporting individuals again. They start as little children. Just like in our preschool. We take children and we try to work with the families".

"And, I think those are the two large entities that need to be, continue to be pushed and challenged and revamped. I mean, I think over time, we have to continue to push those large organizations, especially the public sector".

The administrator lights on the inequities between public and private education:

"I mean, private groups like our preschool, we can do a lot, but we are a very private nonprofit. (…) We're only accessible to certain people until the public systems start to support [others] in the same way. I think that's the place where the biggest impact has occur".

"I don't know if we're still there and making that huge impact, but I think people are working really hard towards it. I think that people are trying to have impact there. It's just, again, it takes a lot of time to have, it takes a lot of time to create change at that level".

The administrator highlighted persistent inequities in access, tied to broader issues of social and economic capital:

(…) I think we need to continue to kind of fight in some ways for the publicity and the importance of it. And recognizing that it's not just about (…) the disability itself, but it really is about social equity, just like so many other things, you know".

> *"People who don't have the right resources, they don't have the right education systems. They don't have, like, if we're going to create places where people have a better quality of life, whether it's people with special needs or other challenges or needs, there needs to be more, equity across, you know, how we provide resources and how people can access those resources. And again, we just continue to see that it's not it's not equitable. It's not easily accessible for people. It has a lot to do with how much money you have and how much education you have. But again, as a, as a country continuing to push that our systems change".*

> *"I don't have any great ideas on it. You know, I'm not like while I say all this, it's hard to pinpoint exactly what we should be doing to make that point and to make that change. Again, I, I think it's better than it was before, but there's a lot of work to do. You know, like we're continuing to do it".*

Although the three participants voiced different experiences and emphases, their perspectives converge around shared themes – belonging, equity, and the ongoing effort to make inclusion real. Taken together, these narratives reveal both the achievements and the paradoxes of inclusion within a private educational context. In doing so, they echo Mendel's pedagogy of the common place, highlighting inclusion as a fragile yet vital social practice – one shaped by relationships, values, and the uneven terrain of educational opportunity.

Institutional and Community Collaboration

Collaboration with universities and local communities also constitutes an integral element of the preschool's inclusive practice. University students frequently come for observations, internships, and, in some cases, later employment. Community-oriented events further reinforce inclusive values, particularly among those closest to the preschool community – teachers, parents, and administrators. These include shared celebrations of various holidays, preschool gatherings, parents acting as chaperones during field trips, providing additional supplies through charity initiatives, and advocating for people with disabilities.

Supervision and continuous professional development within the inclusion team play a crucial role, offering teachers and specialists both professional guidance and access to valuable resources that sustain inclusive practices.

Discussion in the light of Pedagogy of Common Place

In this context, the interpretation of these findings through the lens of Maria Mendel's *pedagogy of the common place* is inherently bittersweet. Although the preschool observed may be regarded as a model example of inclusion, it remains, in essence, merely an *island of inclusion* – a localized manifestation that does not

eliminate the systemic barriers that persist within public education. The most pressing challenges emerge in the form of limited accessibility resulting from private funding and the lack of continuity across subsequent stages of education.

What becomes evident here is Mendel's apprehension regarding the pathologies generated by the privatization of education. On one level, we encounter exemplary collaboration among various actors – students, parents, teachers/therapists, and the school's administration – who collectively care for the public good and the common place embodied by the preschool. Yet, I cannot escape the impression that this form of inclusion is, paradoxically, deeply exclusive: it remains inaccessible to those who lack the financial means required for entry into this space.

Democracy and equity are visibly enacted here; however, a critical question arises concerning the quality of such equity – an equity that, in practice, does not extend to everyone. In institutions deprived of adequate resources, one must often rely on the goodwill or professional competence of those involved in the process, rather than on systemic or structural solutions.

As an "inclusive/exclusive" island, the preschool risks sliding into the very category of educational segregation that inclusive practices seek to transcend. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that this preschool, in its particular configuration, may indeed fulfill the criteria of a common place: as an expression of otherness, it anchors itself in diversity and in the fragile unity of the local community.

Conclusions

Analyzing the findings, I observe a clear correlation between the strong collaboration of parents, teachers, specialists, and children – an interrelation that transforms the preschool into a community growing together toward inclusion. Another factor that strengthens inclusive practices is the ongoing cooperation with the local community and nearby universities. The key strengths – collaborative culture, evidence-based practices, and active family engagement – are particularly visible here. Inclusion seems to thrive where community, shared values, and collaboration intersect.

It is, however, both an advantage and a limitation that an institution with an inclusive profile tends to attract individuals who consciously identify with its mission. This phenomenon brings hope by fostering awareness and shaping lasting social attitudes, yet without systemic continuity such inclusion remains uncertain – it risks becoming merely a sweet memory in the lives of children who graduate from such preschool.

At the same time, evidence-based and reflective practices appear to be fundamental to achieving sustainable inclusion and should be implemented across all early education settings, regardless of whether they are public or private.

In conclusion, promoting systemic continuity of inclusion across educational stages is highly recommended; ideally, this should be accompanied by the strengthening of public funding for inclusive early education. Encouraging partnerships between preschools, universities, and local communities is equally vital – not only for sustaining inclusion, but also for creating common places that embody shared values and cooperation, across both public and private institutions.

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