

Policy Challenges in Implementing Equal Educational Opportunities for Special Needs Students

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ABSTRACT:

Equal educational opportunity for special needs students remains a major concern in contemporary education policy, particularly as many education systems seek to expand inclusive education. Although policy frameworks increasingly recognize the right of students with disabilities and diverse learning needs to access mainstream education, significant gaps remain between policy commitments and school-level implementation. This review examines the major policy challenges affecting the implementation of equal educational opportunities for special needs students. It highlights that access to school alone is insufficient unless students are also provided with meaningful participation, individualized support, reasonable accommodation, accessible learning environments, dignity, and fair learning outcomes. The review identifies major barriers including the policy-practice gap, inadequate funding, shortage of trained teachers and support staff, inaccessible infrastructure, limited assistive technology, rigid curricula, weak assessment accommodations, delayed identification systems, social stigma, poor inter-agency coordination, and limited monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The article argues that inclusive education must be understood through an equity-based and rights-based approach rather than as a simple placement policy. Effective implementation requires coordinated governance,

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disability-inclusive budgeting, professional capacity building, accessible infrastructure, flexible curriculum and assessment systems, reliable data collection, transparent monitoring, and inclusive school cultures. Strengthening these areas can help translate inclusive education policies into practical educational justice for special needs students.

Keywords: special needs students; inclusive education; equal educational opportunity; special education policy; disability rights; educational equity.

1. Introduction

Equality of educational opportunity is a core tenet of inclusive education, especially for students with special needs who have historically been excluded from mainstream education, had limited access to appropriate support services, and experienced disparities in learning outcomes. For these students, equality of opportunity includes not only school access but also meaningful participation, reasonable adjustments, accessible learning environments, individualized support, and fair opportunities for academic and social development. In the last few decades, inclusive education has emerged as a policy priority in education systems, and is part of a wider transition away from segregated and special education models towards the understanding of learner diversity as a natural phenomenon in education. International experience indicates that for inclusion and equity, an approach that goes beyond policy commitment is necessary and this approach needs to be in terms of school culture, school practices, governance and resource allocation (Ainscow, 2020).

Findings indicate that inclusive education can be beneficial for students with disabilities and their peers when it is planned for effectively and adequate resources are provided. Participation, academic expectations, peer relationships and social inclusion over time can benefit from inclusive settings. But the benefits are dependent on well-trained teachers, support infrastructure, assistive technology, flexibility of curriculum, and support systems at the school level. In the absence of these factors this can lead to symbolic

inclusion, in which pupils are enrolled in the mainstream setting but lack the necessary support required to ensure they are fully included in learning and participation (Hehir et al., 2016).

One question that continues to be a policy issue in special education is whether inclusion is a goal for all students or only for those considered “easier to include.” This quandary captures the conflict between the policy ideals of inclusion and classroom reality. While some countries have inclusive education policies, students with complex disabilities, multiple needs or behavioural and communication difficulties may be marginalized, have limited access and/or be segregated in special settings. Hence, policy implementation should cover the entire breadth of special needs students and not be restricted to, or selective for, inclusion (Leijen et al., 2021).

Inclusive learning environments are also significant as they can have positive results for the wider school community. Interactive and cooperative classrooms can foster empathy, social awareness, peer learning, and acceptance of diversity between students with and without special needs. These contexts are ones of challenge to deficit conceptions of disability and support schools to think of difference as a normal part of their educational life. This, however, calls for teachers and institutions to go beyond access-based inclusion and enter into active participation, interactions in the classroom, and shared learning experiences (Molina Roldán et al., 2021).

Although there is increased policy recognition, there is significant variation in implementation across many education systems. Schools may be

constrained by institutional, financial, pedagogical, infrastructural, and social barriers in their ability to offer equal education opportunities. Problems faced are lack of funds, lack of trained teachers and special educators, inaccessible schools, lack of assistive technology, inflexible curriculum, insufficient assessment accommodation, low quality data collection and monitoring. The capacity of local governance, attitudes of communities and leadership of schools also affect the implementation of inclusive education policies (Schuelka, 2018).

Inclusion is a priority of global education policy increasingly with a commitment to dealing with all types of exclusion and marginalization. The 'all means all' principle emphasises the need to ensure that no child is denied access to the educational opportunity because of their disability, poverty, gender, language, ethnicity or other intersecting disadvantage (UNESCO, 2020). Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable because they are frequently underrepresented in education statistics and less visible in planning and service delivery systems (UNICEF, 2021). Thus, building strong systems of support – financial, trained staff, infrastructure, assistive technology, data and accountability – is important for securing equal opportunity in education (World Bank, 2022). The present review considers the key issues of policy implementation for the education of special needs learners and proposes policy reforms to put inclusive and equitable education into effect.

2. Conceptual Background: Equal Educational Opportunity and Special Needs Education

Equal educational opportunity is the right of all learners to access, participate in and enjoy quality education on an equal basis. This is not just about getting the child into school with special needs, but also being able to make the most of their school experience. It encompasses meaningful involvement, suitable learning support, accessible facilities, flexible learning approaches, reasonable adjustments and dignity, and fair educational outcomes. International inclusive education

research indicates that equal opportunity is more broadly interpreted than merely getting students with disability to attend mainstream schools, and it is not only about access, but also about participation (Amor et al., 2019).

Special needs students are defined as those who need extra educational, developmental, behavioral, emotional, physical, sensory, intellectual or communication needs. This can involve students who have vision or hearing impairments, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum conditions, learning disabilities, emotional and behavioural difficulties, developmental delays and/or multiple disabilities. They have different educational needs and requirements and a uniform model of the teaching process is not always adequate. Inclusive education requires education systems to eliminate barriers to inclusive education and to ensure that support is available to ensure that all learners participate on an equal basis with others (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

An important difference to be noted in this discussion is that between equality and equity. For most people, equality is equality of opportunity or equality of treatment to all students. But special needs students may need various amounts or forms of support to receive the same amount of educational participation. Equity is therefore an acknowledgement that fairness might need extra resources, individualized support, assistive technology, curriculum adaptation or assessment accommodation. Inclusive education is effective only when schools take action and make concrete, long-term efforts toward learner diversity (Haug, 2017).

Inclusive education is an opportunity for a less exclusionary approach to learning and enhancing participation of all learners in education. But the effectiveness of the policy implementation in the school, classroom and support systems is key to its success (Kefallinou et al., 2020). Others have also suggested that inclusive education is not only about a narrow technical problem but it is also a matter of educational justice, participation and

voice of the learner (Messiou, 2017). Meanwhile, conversations are ongoing about what is and isn't included in the definition, particularly when students need intensive or specialist support (Norwich, 2022).

Inclusion should be viewed as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that encompasses access, acceptance, participation, achievement and belonging (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). It

compels education systems to shift their notions of disability from deficit to rights and equity models, and to move from exclusion towards learning for all the students (Slee & Tomlinson, 2018). A range of dimensions of equal educational opportunity in the field of special needs education can be understood, such as access, participation, support, equity, and belonging as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Core Dimensions of Equal Educational Opportunity for Special Needs Students

Dimension	Meaning in special needs education	Policy implication	Reference
Access	Students with special needs should be able to enter and remain in education without discrimination or exclusion.	Policies should guarantee admission, non-discrimination, and barrier-free access to schooling.	Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016)
Participation	Students should not only be enrolled but should actively participate in classroom, peer, and school activities.	Schools should promote classroom interaction, peer acceptance, and participation in school life.	Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018)
Learning support	Students may require individualized instruction, support services, assistive devices, or modified teaching strategies.	Education systems should provide differentiated support based on learner needs.	Amor et al. (2019)
Equity	Fairness may require additional resources or accommodations rather than identical treatment for all students.	Policies should move beyond equality and provide need-based support.	Haug (2017)
Inclusion	Inclusive education should reduce exclusion and support learning for all students.	Schools should transform practices, not simply place students in mainstream classrooms.	Kefallinou et al. (2020)
Belonging and dignity	Students should feel accepted, respected, and valued within the school community.	Policy should address attitudes, stigma, and recognition of learner voice.	Messiou (2017)

3. Methodology

The article used a comprehensive narrative review method to discuss the policy challenges of implementing equal education in the field of special education. The review was based on journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and relevant books on inclusive

education, special education, disability rights, educational equity, and policy implementation.

The literature was retrieved from selected academic search engines and databases, such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus and Web of Science. These keywords were used to search for information, including: “special needs students”, “equal educational opportunity”, “inclusive

education policy”, “special education policy challenges”, “students with disabilities”, “policy implementation”, “barriers to inclusive education”, and “reasonable accommodation”. Relevant sources were chosen for inclusive education, special needs education, disability policy, education equity, and implementation issues.

The literature selected was thematically organized and analyzed. The themes were policy-practice gaps, lack of funding, lack of trained teachers, inaccessible learning environment, lack of assistive technology, rigid curriculum and assessment systems, ineffective monitoring systems and social attitudes towards special needs students. The review was organised around these themes, and the areas for further enhancement in policy implementation were identified.

4. Policy Frameworks for Equal Educational Opportunities

Equal educational opportunities policy is based on human rights, non-discrimination, social inclusion and educational equity. These frameworks state that the right to education should not just be the right to attend mainstream school but also the right to join mainstream, to have support services available, to have reasonable accommodation, to have access to learning materials that are accessible, and to remain free from exclusion, for special needs students. The commitment to inclusive education has been more recently tied to the broader international agenda of sustainable development (United Nations, 2018), which has been associated by many with the need to take action on structures that inhibit persons with disabilities from exercising their right to participate in social and economic life.

Increasingly, educational systems, and indeed educators, understand that equity and inclusion are addressed through policies that attend to the diversity of learners, and do not treat everyone the same. Equal educational opportunity requires an education system that is flexible enough to accommodate students' physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, emotional,

behavioral and learning disabilities. The contemporary education policy holds that diversity is a strength and schools must be able to offer differentiated support, inclusive pedagogies and safe learning environments for all learners (OECD, 2023). In this context, inclusive education policies are designed to prevent a child with disability from being removed, excluded or separated from good quality learning opportunities and to ensure they are in school alongside their peers with appropriate support (UNICEF, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the vulnerabilities of learners with disabilities and demonstrated the need to have policy frameworks that will include both physical and digital inclusion. School closures, home schooling, and the differential access to technology underscored that special needs students may be disproportionately impacted when there is less or no support. This further underscored the importance of education policies which incorporate assistive technology, accessible digital platforms, personalised support and a continuity of services during emergencies (World Bank, 2020). There is also evidence that inclusive education is not only about school participation but is an important part of wider social inclusion, which is why the implementation of the policy is important for long term equality and community participation (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018).

But the recognition of a policy is not enough to ensure equal educational opportunity. The effectiveness of implementation relies on how policies are enacted in teacher preparation, curriculum redesign, available school facilities, learning materials, and learning environment support. Teachers and other actors in the education sector have a vital role in the process of making policy objectives into practice (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022), which makes inclusive teacher professional learning particularly important. In the same way, curriculum must be flexible enough to address all

learners and address varying learning profiles (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2016). Accessible digital textbooks and learning materials also serve as evidence that policy should evolve from generic pledges to concrete tools that enable learning to take place in the day-to-day (UNICEF, 2022).

Table 2 reveals that equal educational opportunity is more than formal recognition, it is also represented by mechanisms of access, support, accommodation, teacher preparation and accessible learning resources.

Table 2. Policy Foundations and Implementation Requirements for Equal Educational Opportunities

Policy area	Main focus	Implementation requirement	Reference
Disability and development	Links disability inclusion with sustainable development and social participation.	Education systems should remove structural barriers that limit participation of persons with disabilities.	United Nations (2018)
Equity and inclusion	Recognizes learner diversity as a strength within education systems.	Schools should provide flexible support for diverse physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, and learning needs.	OECD (2023)
Inclusive education for children with disabilities	Promotes quality learning for children with disabilities in inclusive settings.	Policies should ensure access to mainstream schooling with appropriate support services.	UNICEF (2017)
Emergency and digital inclusion	Highlights the vulnerability of learners with disabilities during crises and remote learning.	Systems should provide accessible digital platforms, assistive technology, and continuity of support.	World Bank (2020)
Social inclusion	Connects inclusive education with wider social participation and long-term equality.	Educational inclusion should support both school participation and broader social inclusion.	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018)
Teacher professional learning	Emphasizes the role of education professionals in implementing inclusion.	Inclusive teacher training should be integrated into professional development systems.	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022)
Curriculum accessibility	Focuses on reaching all learners through flexible curriculum design.	Curriculum should be adaptable to diverse learning profiles and support needs.	UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2016)
Accessible learning resources	Promotes accessible digital textbooks and learning materials.	Learning resources should be designed for students with visual, hearing, cognitive, and communication needs.	UNICEF (2022)

As shown in Figure 1, inclusive education policy becomes meaningful when policy commitments are translated through governance, school-level implementation, inclusive teaching, accessible learning environments, and continuous monitoring systems.

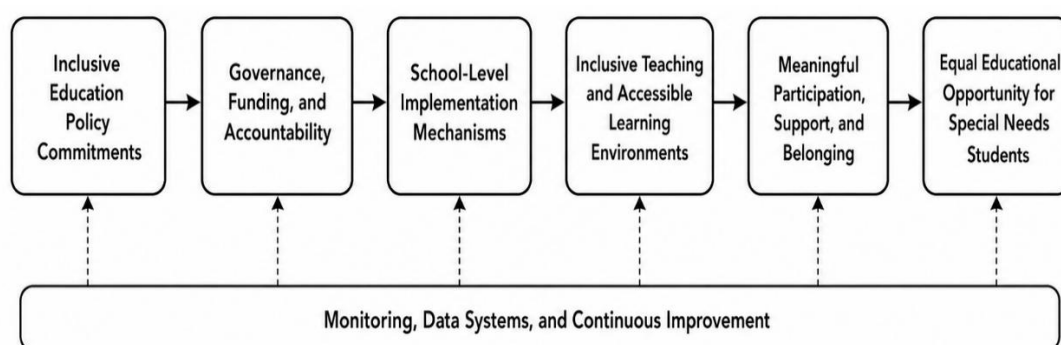


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Translating Inclusive Education Policy into Equal Educational Opportunity

5. Major Policy Challenges in Implementation

5.1 Policy-Practice Gap

A recurring issue in the pursuit of equal opportunities in education for learners with special educational needs is the mismatch between policy and good practice at school level. Inclusive education is formally supported in many education systems, however, practice is not always consistent because schools may lack operational guidelines, administrative support, trained staff, and monitoring systems. Policy intentions for inclusive education are often met with challenges in low- and lower-middle-income settings due to the lack of institutional support and capacity, and long-term planning to implement inclusive education policies (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024). This means that students with special needs may be placed in mainstream schools where they are not provided with the necessary supports to participate meaningfully in school. This results in a policy focus on inclusion but low levels of inclusion in practice.

The experiences of students also indicate that inclusive education is not necessarily perceived as a place of belonging. They are often reported to have difficulty accessing appropriate learning opportunities, with peer acceptance, teacher support and barriers to participation also reported by children and youth with disabilities (Paul et al., 2022). As in secondary education, the

inclusion of students with SEN can be uneven, particularly if the academic curriculum, the interaction within the classroom, and emotional support are not aligned (Subban et al., 2022). The findings indicate that there is more to equal educational opportunity than school enrollment – it also means being academically, socially and emotionally included.

5.2 Inadequate Funding and Resource Allocation

Another significant challenge to the implementation of inclusive education is the lack of funds. Financial investment is needed in the area of special educators, classroom assistants, assistive devices, resource rooms, accessible transportation, adapted materials, and individualized support services for equal educational opportunities. If there is a lack of resources, the schools may have difficulties in providing even basic accommodations. Inclusive teaching is related to students' perception of academic, social and emotional inclusion, and therefore, resources play a role in students' classroom experience of inclusion (Alnahdi et al., 2022). Without adequate resources, teachers may be expected to include special needs students without the necessary tools and support.

Resourcing is also a challenge for schools in terms of meeting complex needs. Policy discussions about inclusion have called for a 'balance' between valuing the diversity of learners

and providing specialist support when needed (Kauffman et al., 2018). Where inclusive education is not adequately resourced it could lead to an unreasonable workload for mainstream schools and result in a decrease in quality of provision for pupils with high needs. Thus, funding is not a secondary consideration, but an essential condition for a meaningful implementation.

5.3 Shortage of Trained Teachers and Support Staff

Consistent with inclusive education is the preparedness of teachers. While many teachers think inclusion is a great value, many teachers may feel uneasy about teaching students with a variety of disabilities, behavioral needs, communication challenges, and learning challenges. Teacher training may be lacking in the areas of differentiated instruction, classroom management, understanding disabilities, individualized education planning, and collaborative teaching. Research regarding teachers' perceptions of inclusion demonstrates that the confidence of teachers and the leadership in school practice are strong factors influencing the implementation of inclusive practice (Mngo & Mngo, 2018). Without proper preparation, inclusive education can be a source of stress and not an effective education system.

It is even more true for children with autism and other developmental disorders in which teachers will need to have some understanding of communication, behavior, sensory needs and structured supports. Research on teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards inclusive education for children diagnosed with autism revealed that in order for children with autism to be included in classrooms, there must be professional understanding of teachers (Alassaf, 2025). The role of school leadership is also significant, as principals affect resources, teachers' working relationships, and school cultures that are inclusive (Sider et al., 2017). Hence, teacher training is not enough for inclusive education; it also requires coordinated support from the leaders of the school, specialist staff, and other support professionals.

5.4 Inaccessible Infrastructure and Learning Environments

Although there are some strides forward for special needs students, physical, digital, and communication barriers remain, limiting access to equal educational opportunities for these students. A lack of accessible classrooms, toilets, transport, playgrounds and school buildings may make it impossible for a student with a physical disability to take part in all aspects of school life. Likewise, those who have sensory or communication disabilities might encounter obstacles when using uncaptioned resources, unable to access digital resources, or lack access to assistive technologies, sign language support, or braille materials. The literature of social inclusion has highlighted that inclusion should be about participation in the normal social and educational environment, not just being there (Koller et al., 2018).

Students' academic and emotional needs should also be taken into account to make learning environments responsive. Evidence on inclusion suggests that students with SE needs can reap academic and socio-emotional benefits from inclusive settings when provided in a well-supported way, but some evidence indicates that poorly implemented inclusion is likely to have a limited effect (Dalgaard et al., 2022). Accessibility is therefore to be interpreted in a broad sense. Ramps, buildings, and communication access are not the only parts of it, but it also involves learning materials, learning interaction in classrooms and emotional safety.

5.5 Rigid Curriculum and Assessment Systems

Standardized assessments and rigid curriculum can present great challenges for students with special needs. Many education systems are still using a uniform learning outcome, teaching method and examination format that are not adequately mirroring the diversity of the learners. Flexibility in the curriculum, differentiated instruction, personalized learning and assessment accommodations are all essential components of inclusive education. Studies on differentiation

and personalisation in inclusive classrooms indicate that there is a distinction between students' and teachers' views on inclusive support, which means that teaching needs to be responsive to students' learning profiles (Lindner et al., 2019). If left unmodified, students with special needs may be physically present in the classroom but academically excluded.

Effectiveness of learning pathways is also demonstrated by the long-term impacts of educational placement. However, in some cases, when students have severe physical and multiple disabilities, the availability of individualized support, continuity of services and flexible educational arrangements may be a prerequisite for completing upper secondary education (Heräjärvi et al., 2020). Thus, assessment systems for equal opportunity should acknowledge variations in learning and in demonstrating achievement.

5.6 Weak Identification and Early Intervention Systems

There is also less opportunity for education due to late identification of disabilities and poor early intervention systems. Some students arrive at school with inadequate learning, developmental, behavioral, and/or communication assessment. However, in other instances there is no referral system, specialist support or coordination with families and health care providers. The process of parents' experiences in educational decision

making demonstrates that this is a complex process when it comes to seeking support for children with disabilities (Kurth et al., 2017). If not identified and intervened upon, students are likely to fail academically, lack confidence, and suffer social isolation prior to meaningful intervention.

5.7 Social Stigma and Institutional Attitudes

The social stigma, negative attitudes, bullying and low expectations continue to be significant obstacles to inclusive education. The attitudes and intentions of teachers have a significant impact on the inclusion, support, and marginalization of special needs students in classrooms (Opoku et al., 2021). In other settings, inclusive reform is also influenced by teachers' expectations of the possibility of "all learners" in neighborhood schools (Lakkala et al., 2016). These attitudes impact class participation, peer involvement, and family confidence in school. Thus, the implementation of policy needs to be more than about resources and infrastructure, it needs to be about social and institutional cultures that influence daily educational experiences.

The key implementation issues highlighted in this review suggest that there is a need for coordinated policy actions at the levels of funding, teacher preparation, accessibility, curriculum, early intervention and school culture, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Major Policy Challenges and Required Implementation Responses

Policy challenge	How it limits equal educational opportunity	Required policy response	Reference
Policy-practice gap	Inclusive policies may remain strong in principle but weak in classroom implementation.	Develop clear implementation guidelines, school-level support structures, and long-term planning.	Mendoza and Heymann (2024)
Limited participation and belonging	Students with disabilities may be enrolled but still experience exclusion from learning and peer interaction.	Monitor academic, social, and emotional inclusion, not only enrollment.	Paul et al. (2022)

Inadequate funding	Schools may lack special educators, assistive devices, resource rooms, transport, and individualized support.	Allocate disability-inclusive budgets with protected funding for support services.	Alnahdi et al. (2022)
Shortage of trained teachers	Teachers may feel unprepared to address diverse disabilities, behavioral needs, or communication difficulties.	Strengthen pre-service and in-service training in inclusive pedagogy and disability awareness.	Mngo and Mngo (2018)
Lack of leadership support	Schools may not develop inclusive cultures or coordinated support systems.	Prepare principals to lead inclusive schools and support teacher collaboration.	Sider et al. (2017)
Inaccessible environments	Physical, digital, and communication barriers restrict participation.	Improve accessible infrastructure, learning materials, assistive technology, and communication support.	Koller et al. (2018)
Rigid curriculum and assessment	Standardized teaching and examination systems may exclude learners with diverse needs.	Introduce curriculum flexibility, differentiated instruction, and assessment accommodations.	Lindner et al. (2019)
Weak identification and early intervention	Delayed assessment may prevent timely support and increase educational failure.	Establish screening, referral, and family-supported intervention systems.	Kurth et al. (2017)
Social stigma and negative attitudes	Low expectations, stereotypes, and bullying can limit participation and belonging.	Promote disability awareness, inclusive school culture, and positive teacher attitudes.	Opoku et al. (2021)
Weak implementation culture	Teachers may doubt whether mainstream schools can support all learners.	Build school-wide commitment to inclusion through leadership, training, and community engagement.	Lakkala et al. (2016)

6. Governance, Monitoring, and Accountability Issues

Governance is a key element in the effective implementation of equal educational opportunities for special needs students. Inclusive education policies require coordination among multiple institutions such as education departments, schools, health services, social welfare agencies, disability support organizations, teacher training institutions, and families. But lack of coordination among these stakeholders can lead to disjointed implementation. If the roles and responsibilities are not clear, then complex needs may not be managed effectively, as schools do not have access to specialist advice or systems of referral and/or administrative assistance.

Inclusive education, therefore, must be considered as a complex system of education and not simply as a reform at the school level (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022).

Administrative obstacles also arise when national or regional policy objectives are not implemented at the school level. While teachers and school leaders might have an understanding of inclusion in theory, they may lack clarity on how to practice inclusion in practice. For instance, the teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are heavily influenced by the resources available, professional training and development, institutional norms and support from the leadership (Page et al., 2019). If not implemented clearly, schools can establish differential practices

with only a portion of students experiencing effective support but others being formally placed in mainstream classes.

Governance challenges are closely connected to family and community conditions. Students with special needs can often require coordinated support which goes beyond classroom support especially where disability intersects with poverty, family stress, limited access to services/social disadvantage. Research on family disability and poverty demonstrates that disability can exacerbate family stress and limit families' ability to access educational and support services (Hunt et al., 2021). This serves to indicate that family-school co-operation is an important aspect of inclusive education governance. Students may not be receiving timely accommodations or appropriate intervention if families are not included in the decision-making or don't know about the options available.

Teacher preparation is also a governance issue as education systems are accountable for teachers being prepared to support the implementation of inclusive policies. In improving pre-service teachers' self-efficacy, the strategies used were important because teachers' confidence impacts on their readiness and willingness to integrate students with intellectual disabilities, autism and other support needs into mainstream classrooms (Koh, 2018). If teacher education systems do not include and address disability awareness and differentiated instruction, then implementation of policy relies on the individual teacher rather than the system.

Lack of reliable disability-disaggregated data and monitoring indicators is another significant challenge. Policymakers would have no accurate data on enrollment, attendance, participation, accommodations, learning outcomes, dropout, and transition to be able to determine who is missing out or if policies for inclusion are effective. However, in many contexts in the global South, poverty, inadequate infrastructure and institutional capacity are other constraints on disability and education, and systematic monitoring is even more significant (Singal et al., 2018).

There is also a low level of accountability systems in many inclusive education settings. Regular Inclusion audits, reporting accessibility issues and documenting whether or not a student receives reasonable accommodation may not be required in schools. Families might not be familiar with or able to reach out to grievance procedures. This means that policy failure can go on without being reviewed in an open way. Another challenge that teachers experience is when they are expected to teach students with emotional and behavioral difficulties without having the necessary institutional support, the collaboration of specialists, and resources at their level of the classroom (Gidlund, 2018). Thus, inclusive education policies must be continuously assessed, reported openly, have disability-sensitive data collection systems, provide grievance procedures, and have school-level accountability procedures that help to ensure that equal opportunity to education is realised in practice.

7. Policy Recommendations

The implementation of equal educational opportunities for special needs students demands policy action in several areas such as government planning, leadership of schools, teacher education, curriculum reform, the involvement of the family and accountability systems. Governments should implement disability inclusive education budgeting. Accessible materials and equipment, assistive technology, resource rooms, learning materials, transport, special teachers, resource room assistants, and individualised services should be budgeted for in the financial plan. If there is no safeguarding of funding, inclusive education policies may be only partially realised and not be consistent from school to school.

The capacity of school leadership needs to be enhanced as a key component of inclusive education reform. Principals and administrators should be ready to lead inclusive schools by organizing support services, encouraging collaboration among teachers, involving families and providing students with special needs with appropriate accommodations. Leadership preparation for special education and inclusive

schools is paramount as school leaders have an impact on how resources are allocated, how teachers collaborate, the culture in the school, and how the policies on inclusion are interpreted in practice (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Inclusive education training must be made compulsory in pre-service and in-service teacher development at teacher education institutions. Practical training for teachers in differentiated instruction, disability awareness, classroom management, individualized learning plan, assistive technology and collaborative teaching are needed. Co-teaching should also be encouraged, as the general educator and the special educator will be able to share the responsibilities of planning, teaching and evaluating in inclusive classrooms (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018). This partnership can help alleviate isolation for teachers and bring better support to students with a variety of needs.

The education systems should increase the application of assistive and educational technologies and make sure that technology is not used in place of human support. Using digital tools, accessible learning platforms, screen readers, captioning, communication devices, and adaptive learning resources can enhance access to learning for students with disabilities. Technologies, however, should be accompanied by teacher training and technical support, as well as affordability and accessibility criteria to ensure that technologies are not just new obstacles but solutions (Samaniego López et al., 2025).

The flexibility of curriculum and assessment systems should be increased. Special needs students may need adapted learning materials, alternative demonstration of knowledge, more time, modified tasks and may even need an individual assessment arrangement. Examining the psychological impact of high-stakes tests is important for educators to consider when planning these tests to ensure students remain in good emotional health, which can positively impact their performance and educational trajectory (Jerrim, 2022). Assessment accommodations should, therefore, be viewed as part of equal opportunity, not as exceptions.

Differentiated instruction should be embedded in the daily teaching. Teacher educators must equip future teachers with the ability to create lessons to cater to the various learning profiles, abilities, interests and support needs of learners. Differentiated instruction is a process of adapting content, process, classroom tasks and learning outcomes without reducing expectations for students with special needs (Ginja & Chen, 2020). The need for universal design for learning to be incorporated into policy and practice also comes from using flexible learning environments that decrease barriers at the outset of instruction instead of just providing accommodations later on (Capp, 2017).

Early identification and family-school collaboration needs to be reinforced. Schools should have screening, referral and support processes in place which enable the early identification of learning, developmental, behavioural or communication needs. Families should be engaged in education decision making: they know a lot about the needs, strengths, and support history of the child. Policy mapping on autism and education reveals that family involvement is an important aspect in achieving right to education for children with disabilities (van Kessel et al., 2019).

Improvements are needed in the governments and schools' data collection, indicators of inclusion, monitoring mechanisms, and accountability frameworks with regard to the disability-disaggregated data. Inclusion audit at school level, reporting, grievance procedures and the review of accommodation practices can help to ensure that inclusive education policies are put into practice. It is not enough to recognize the need for equal education opportunity; it also needs to be monitored over time, provided adequate resources, trained professionals, and shared responsibility amongst governments, schools, families, and communities.

8. Conclusion

Inclusive education for special needs students is more than just being formally acknowledged in education policy. While inclusive education

policies have been adopted in many education systems, there are still many structural, institutional and social barriers that hinder implementation. Students with diverse needs continue to be denied access to education due to funding gaps, lack of trained teachers and support staff, inaccessible infrastructure, inflexible curricula, poor assessment accommodations, lack of assistive technology, lack of timely identification systems, social stigma, and weak monitoring systems. The problems demonstrate that the introduction of inclusive policy does not always lead to inclusive practice. The review emphasizes that special needs students not only have a right to access to schools but to the opportunity to participate, with individual attention, in an accessible learning environment where they are treated with dignity and provided with fair learning outcomes. Not all students face the same barriers to learning and to participation in school activities, and equality of treatment is not enough. Equality in education should be approached from an equity based and rights-

based perspective, taking into account the need for reasonable accommodation, differentiated instruction, flexible assessment, and supportive school cultures. Effective implementation requires coordination and shared responsibility among governments, schools, teacher education institutions, families, health professionals, social welfare agencies, and community organizations. Sustained investment, professional capacity building, disability-inclusive budgeting, reliable data systems, transparent monitoring, and accountability mechanisms are needed for the implementation of policies. Schools require inclusive cultures in which diversity is valued and learner differences are met in a positive manner. Strengthening these areas can help move inclusive education beyond policy statements toward practical educational justice. Finally, equal educational opportunity for special needs students will only be realized if policy promises are put into practice and all students are able to participate, learn and achieve success.

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