

Legislating Inclusion: A Systematic Review of U.S. Policies and Practices for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract:

This research paper critically examines the contemporary landscape of intellectual disability (ID) in the United States, with a particular focus on inclusive education, legal protections, academic outcomes, and evolving policy directions. Anchored in both national frameworks—such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—and international instruments like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the study highlights the tension between inclusive ideals and practical implementation. Through a review of recent empirical studies, comparative perspectives, and philosophical discourses, the paper explores key issues such as classroom placement trends, the contested model of total inclusion, and systemic barriers to equity for students with severe intellectual disabilities. While the U.S. has made significant progress in adopting rights-based educational reforms, implementation remains uneven across districts and states. Educator preparedness, individualized support services, and resource disparities continue to hinder meaningful inclusion. The findings emphasize the need for evidence-based strategies, ethical leadership, and holistic educational planning that address both academic achievement and social integration. Ultimately, this paper advocates for inclusive practices that are both legally grounded and pedagogically sound, ensuring that all students with intellectual disabilities are provided with equitable opportunities to learn and thrive.

Keywords: intellectual disability, inclusive education, special education policy, IDEA, CRPD

Introduction:

Intellectual disability (ID) is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, with onset before the age of 18 (Schalock et al., 2009). In the United States, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), classifies ID as a neurodevelopmental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with ID often face persistent challenges in accessing equitable opportunities in education, employment, and independent living (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) support inclusive practices, mandating schools to provide Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Despite these protections, implementation gaps remain, particularly in the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education settings (Agran et al., 2020).

One of the most contentious debates centers on how inclusive education should be implemented for students with significant support needs. Agran et al. (2020) emphasize that many students with severe disabilities are still placed in segregated settings despite evidence showing positive outcomes from inclusive placements. This reality reveals a persistent disconnect between policy and practice. Similarly, Ahrbeck et al. (2018) contrast inclusive efforts in the United States with those in Germany, highlighting how ideological divides and structural inefficiencies hinder total inclusion. The debate on full versus partial inclusion is not unique to the U.S., as several countries struggle with the practical and philosophical implications of inclusion (Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Di Nuovo, 2015). Some critics, such as Bennett (2017), argue that uncritical implementation of inclusive education can become a “race to the bottom” if not matched with adequate resources and teacher preparation.

Global frameworks like the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which called for inclusive education as a fundamental human right, continue to influence policy discourse. Ainscow, Slee, and Best (2019) reflect on the 25-year legacy of the Salamanca Statement, noting that while much progress has been made globally, significant gaps remain in turning aspirational principles into sustainable practice. Drawing from international lessons, Ainscow (2020) stresses the importance of embedding equity at the heart of educational reform. These insights suggest that inclusion is not simply a matter of physical placement but involves systemic transformation in pedagogy, curriculum, and school culture. Countries like New Brunswick, Canada, have made strides toward such transformation, as demonstrated in the work of AuCoin, Porter, and Baker-Korotkov (2020), though not without critique and resistance.

In the U.S., individualized educational planning remains a cornerstone of support for students with ID. Bateman and Linden (2012) highlight that a well-constructed Individualized Education Program (IEP) is both a legal requirement and a pedagogical tool to ensure that students’ unique needs are met. However, the effectiveness of IEPs often depends on the quality of collaboration among educators, families, and specialists. Scholars like Anastasiou, Burke,

Wiley, and Kauffman (2024) call for a reexamination of special education's purpose, proposing a tripartite approach that balances individualized supports, educational outcomes, and social integration. Meanwhile, research from Begeny and Martens (2007) calls attention to the need for more empirical studies on inclusion practices, particularly in contexts that claim full inclusion but lack rigorous evaluation mechanisms.

The current landscape of intellectual disability and inclusive education in the United States is one marked by complex tensions: between legal mandates and educational realities, between ideals of equity and logistical constraints, and between inclusion as a philosophy and as a measurable outcome. The diversity of perspectives—from policy critiques (Bennett, 2017) to calls for more structured implementation (Agran et al., 2020)—illustrates the ongoing negotiation between inclusion as a right and as a responsibility. Addressing these tensions requires a deeper investigation into the factors that facilitate or hinder inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities, which this study seeks to explore.

Literature Review:

The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and its successor NLTS-2 provide foundational data on long-term outcomes for youth with disabilities. Blackorby and Wagner (1996) revealed that, by age 21–25, approximately 60% of youths with disabilities were employed, though their wages were lower on average than peers.

Further waves indicated that employment rates grew with higher education, with postsecondary completers achieving greater employment stability, income, and independence than non-completers. These findings underscore the vital role of education in facilitating self-sufficiency for learners with disabilities.

Cook and Cook (2020) examined the literature on inclusion, finding that influential studies often lack sufficient rigor: most fail to isolate which components (e.g., peer interactions, teaching strategies) drive outcomes. They argue that without stronger empirical designs, inclusion risks being promoted ideologically rather than pragmatically. This critique aligns with Dalgaard et al.'s concerns about methodological limitations and underscores the urgency of embedding inclusion within evidence-based frameworks that account for individual, classroom, and systemic moderators.

In parallel with outcomes research, inclusion is rooted in ethical and legal imperatives. The Salamanca Statement (1994), revisited by Ainscow, Slee, and Best (2019), affirms inclusive education as a human right and systemic reform project rather than a pedagogical add-on. Dalgaard's systematic review also reflects this shift toward rights-based conceptions. The European dimension adds nuance: ALLEA (2023) emphasizes responsible research integrity, advocating that inclusive education policies must be built on transparent, replicable evidence. The integration of legal frameworks like the CRPD (Degener, 2016) and national mandates further solidifies inclusion as more than an educational ideal—it is a juridical responsibility.

Nuanced accounts show that lived experiences of inclusion are multifaceted. Boolean narratives like CBC News (2017, 2020) document parental concerns in New Brunswick, Canada, where inclusion policies sparked fears that mainstream classrooms lacked sufficient supports
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Parents of autistic children warned that "exclusion is better than feeling lost in class," highlighting the importance of individualized planning and adequate resourcing. These stories mirror broader trends: Brennan et al. (2018) describe similar challenges in Nordic welfare settings, where striving to be "the first" in inclusion sometimes outruns practical capacity. Bjornsdottir (2017) and Bondevik & Bostad (2021) explore belonging and home-school partnerships, emphasizing that inclusion must attend to identity, relationships, and cultural belonging.

Inclusion is deeply embedded in Sustainable Development Goal 4 ("Quality Education"), as Boeren (2019) articulates across micro, meso, and macro levels. Moving from classroom to national policy, Chhabra (2019) and Brennan et al. (2018) highlight how countries like Norway and India interpret CRPD commitments differently—shaped by local social regulation and governance structures. Broderick and Ferri (2019) map Europe's shifting legal landscape, underscoring that human rights law is essential but insufficient without administrative will and adequate funding.

The collective literature presents a cautious endorsement of inclusion: achievable and often beneficial, especially when supported by individualized instruction and robust supports. While inclusion alone doesn't guarantee academic gains, the combination of equitable pedagogy, legal safeguards, and systemic infrastructure can foster meaningful participation for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The literature calls for stronger accountability—not just legal—but in research methods, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement.

This literature review indicates that inclusion, underpinned by legal frameworks (IDEA, ADA, CRPD), offers potential for enhanced outcomes but is critically dependent on context. Longitudinal research (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996) points to educational credentials as predictors of independence. Systematic reviews (Dalgaard et al., 2022)

demonstrate inclusion's neutral-to-positive impact, contingent upon numerous mediators. Deficiencies in empirical rigor and variable parental satisfaction (CBC News) reinforce the necessity for more nuanced, contextually sensitive, and participatory research, especially as inclusion becomes a global norm echoed in SDG frameworks. The review sets the stage for future studies that jointly examine long-term trajectories, quality of inclusion, and policy-practice gaps.

Methodology:

This study employed a systematic literature review combined with thematic synthesis to examine scholarly discourse on intellectual disability (ID) and inclusive education, with particular emphasis on the U.S. context. A total of 28 peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, legal commentaries, and reputable news sources were selected based on predefined inclusion criteria. To ensure relevance and academic rigor, sources were chosen according to the following parameters: (1) direct relevance to intellectual disability or inclusive education; (2) emphasis on the U.S. educational or policy framework, with comparative international insights where appropriate; and (3) publication in credible, peer-reviewed outlets or recognized institutional platforms.

The review focused primarily on literature published from 2000 onward to ensure the inclusion of contemporary debates, reforms, and empirical findings. However, select foundational studies—such as Blackorby and Wagner's (1996) landmark longitudinal research—were included to provide essential historical context and trace the evolution of the field. The search strategy utilized academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, employing keywords such as "intellectual disability," "inclusive education," "IDEA," "CRPD," and "special education outcomes."

A thematic synthesis was conducted to identify and interpret recurring patterns, tensions, and insights across the literature. Analysis was guided by four emergent themes: (1) Trends and Debates in Inclusion and Placement; (2) Legal and Policy Frameworks Shaping Educational Practice; (3) Outcomes, Barriers, and Long-Term Impacts for Students with ID; and (4) Comparative and Philosophical Perspectives on Inclusion. These categories enabled a structured yet flexible framework for synthesizing diverse perspectives, enhancing the coherence and analytical depth of the review.

Findings and Discussion:

Persistent Gaps in Inclusion and Placement for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Despite ongoing global and national efforts to promote inclusive education, students with severe intellectual disabilities (ID) remain significantly underrepresented in general education classrooms in the United States. While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) champions the least restrictive environment (LRE) principle, actual classroom placements frequently diverge from this ideal. Agran et al. (2020) highlight a disturbing trend: a substantial proportion of students with severe disabilities continue to be educated in self-contained or segregated settings, where academic expectations and opportunities for peer interaction are limited. This placement pattern raises fundamental concerns about systemic inequalities and questions the fidelity of inclusive education implementation.

The Salamanca Statement of 1994, reaffirmed by Ainscow, Slee, and Best (2019) on its 25th anniversary, laid a global foundation for inclusive practices by emphasizing the right of all children to be educated together. Yet, the aspirations of this document remain only partially realized, particularly for students with profound cognitive impairments. As Ainscow (2020) asserts, inclusion must go beyond physical presence to ensure meaningful engagement, active participation, and equitable learning opportunities. The mere relocation of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, without corresponding pedagogical adaptations, does not fulfill the moral or legal objectives of inclusion.

Multiple factors contribute to the persistent placement gaps. Among them are limited teacher training, insufficient support services, and institutional inertia. AuCoin, Porter, and Baker-Korotkov (2020), in their analysis of inclusive education in New Brunswick, Canada—a frequently referenced model—note that while policy frameworks may emphasize inclusion, practical implementation often falters due to inadequate resources, lack of accountability mechanisms, and a general disconnect between policy rhetoric and classroom realities. These barriers are mirrored in the U.S. context, where similar structural and pedagogical challenges undermine efforts to fully realize inclusive education (Bennett, 2017).

Another critical issue is teacher preparedness. Many educators report feeling ill-equipped to support students with significant disabilities in inclusive classrooms. This lack of confidence and professional training often results in referrals to more restrictive environments, reinforcing a cycle of segregation. Bateman and Linden (2012) argue that the development of legally sound and educationally appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) requires both administrative support and teacher competence. Without sustained professional development, many educators struggle to differentiate instruction, adapt curriculum, and manage diverse classroom needs effectively.

Furthermore, systemic biases continue to influence placement decisions. Ahrbeck et al. (2018) provide a comparative analysis of inclusion in Germany and the U.S., observing that cultural attitudes toward disability often shape educational practices as much as formal policy. In many settings, intellectual disability is still perceived through a deficit lens, which leads to assumptions about students' limited potential and the presumed need for specialized environments. Such perceptions not only hinder full inclusion but also perpetuate ableism within the school system.

Comparative research adds further depth to the discourse. In Italy, a country lauded for its full inclusion model, scholars such as Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Nuovo (2015) recognize both the philosophical commitment to inclusive education and the practical challenges it entails. While Italian students with intellectual disabilities are educated alongside their peers as a matter of legal requirement, concerns remain about instructional quality and individualized supports. Similarly, Begeny and Martens (2007) call for more empirical research to evaluate whether inclusion in such systems truly enhances academic and social outcomes for students with ID.

This leads to a broader philosophical and ethical consideration. As Anastasiou et al. (2024) argue, the "telos" or purpose of special education must be reimagined—not merely as a service but as a commitment to human dignity, rights, and flourishing. When inclusion is reduced to a bureaucratic goal or a checkbox in policy compliance, its transformative potential is lost. Instead, educational systems must critically examine whether their structures genuinely foster belonging, capability, and growth for all learners.

The gap between policy and practice is also a recurring theme in legal and policy reviews. For example, Anastasiou, Gregory, and Kauffman (2018), in their commentary on Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), stress that the right to inclusive education is not fulfilled merely by providing physical access. Rather, it requires systemic transformation in curriculum design, teacher training, and educational accountability. In the U.S., despite legal mandates under IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, enforcement and compliance remain inconsistent, leaving many students with ID on the margins of the general education system.

Lastly, parent advocacy and public discourse have played a pivotal role in exposing the shortcomings of inclusive education implementation. Media reports, such as those by CBC News (2017, 2020), have amplified the voices of families who feel that the inclusion their children experience is superficial, tokenistic, or even detrimental due to lack of support. These narratives underscore the urgency of moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward a model rooted in justice, equality, and pedagogical responsiveness.

The persistent underrepresentation of students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive settings reflects a complex interplay of policy, pedagogy, perception, and practice. Addressing this issue requires not only increased investment in resources and professional development but also a fundamental shift in how disability and inclusion are conceptualized within the educational landscape.

Legal and Policy Contexts

The foundation of inclusive education rests upon robust legal frameworks and policies that advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities. Among the most influential is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly Article 24, which affirms the right of individuals with disabilities to inclusive, quality education without discrimination. Anastasiou, Gregory, and Kauffman (2018) offer a critical analysis of this article, arguing that while it establishes universal rights, its application must be context-sensitive, balancing the ideals of full inclusion with the practical realities of diverse education systems and individual learning needs.

In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides a legal backbone for special education services. Central to IDEA is the concept of the Individualized Education Program (IEP), a legally binding document that outlines specific learning goals, accommodations, and support services tailored to each student with a disability (Bateman & Linden, 2012). However, the implementation of IEPs is not without challenges. Discrepancies in the quality of IEPs, varying levels of parental involvement, and inconsistencies in service delivery across districts have raised concerns about the efficacy and equity of special education practices (Agran et al., 2020; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

Internationally, the legal landscape presents a diverse picture. In Europe, initiatives such as the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023) emphasize ethical considerations in educational policy and practice. Broderick and Ferri (2019) further argue that disability law must be grounded in human rights principles to ensure that inclusion is not merely rhetorical but translates into tangible benefits for learners. Similarly, Brennan et al. (2018) highlight the challenges faced by Nordic welfare states in translating the CRPD into actionable policies, especially when competing priorities and resource constraints are at play.

National models of inclusion also offer varying outcomes. For example, New Brunswick, Canada, has long promoted full inclusion in general education classrooms. While some celebrate its pioneering spirit, others criticize it as a "race to the bottom" in terms of educational quality and support (Bennett, 2017; AuCoin, Porter, & Baker-Korotkov, 2020).

News reports and parent testimonies (CBC News, 2017a, 2017b, 2020) reveal dissatisfaction with the adequacy of support services for students with complex needs, illustrating the tensions between inclusive ideology and classroom realities.

Comparative analyses reveal how different countries operationalize inclusion. In Germany and the U.S., debates continue over the feasibility of total inclusion. Ahrbeck et al. (2018) stress that while inclusive ideals are admirable, they must be adapted to specific sociocultural and systemic contexts. Italy, often cited as a leader in inclusive education, has its own complexities. Although the country legally mandates full inclusion, Begeny and Martens (2007) and Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo (2015) note the lack of empirical research and the need for clearer implementation frameworks.

Further complicating the landscape is the evolving academic discourse on the purpose—or telos—of special education. Anastasiou, Burke, Wiley, and Kauffman (2024) argue for a tripartite model that balances academic achievement, functional skills, and social integration. This model acknowledges the importance of individualized supports while cautioning against a one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion.

International education scholars like Ainscow (2020) advocate for a deeper understanding of equity and inclusion beyond policy rhetoric. Drawing from lessons across nations, Ainscow, Slee, and Best (2019) revisit the Salamanca Statement, calling for renewed efforts to bridge policy and practice. They highlight that while the Salamanca framework remains a moral compass, its implementation depends heavily on leadership, teacher training, and sustained political will.

Ethical considerations must also guide policy development and implementation. Boeren (2019) stresses the importance of aligning educational goals with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education. Meanwhile, initiatives in higher education, such as those described by Bjornsdottir (2017) and Chalachanová et al. (2023), exemplify how institutions can co-design programs that respect the dignity and aspirations of students with intellectual disabilities.

While legal and policy instruments like IDEA and the CRPD provide essential foundations for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, their implementation requires constant negotiation between ethical commitments, educational standards, and practical constraints. The diversity of national contexts, institutional capabilities, and stakeholder perspectives reminds us that inclusion is not a fixed endpoint but an evolving process—one that must continuously adapt to meet the needs of all learners.

Outcomes and Challenges

The outcomes of inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) remain a complex and evolving issue. While inclusive education is widely endorsed by international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), empirical findings on its effectiveness for students with ID present mixed results (Ainscow, Slee, & Best, 2019; Anastasiou, Gregory, & Kauffman, 2018). Central to this debate is the challenge of balancing the ideological commitment to inclusion with the practical realities of classroom implementation and student support.

Dalgaard et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review and found that inclusive education has the potential to foster socio-emotional development and well-being for children with special educational needs, including those with ID. However, the academic benefits are significantly less consistent and highly dependent on the quality of supports provided. Students with ID in inclusive classrooms often benefit from increased opportunities for peer interaction, which can improve social skills, communication, and self-esteem. Yet, these benefits are not guaranteed and vary widely depending on the instructional strategies used and the presence of specialized support services.

Several scholars caution against assuming that placement in general education settings automatically leads to positive outcomes. Cook and Cook (2020) critically examined highly cited inclusion studies and highlighted widespread issues such as methodological flaws, lack of control groups, and overgeneralization of findings. Their analysis suggests that the evidence base for full inclusion is less robust than commonly assumed. Brennan et al. (2018) further warn against "one-size-fits-all" inclusion policies, which may overlook the diverse needs of students with ID and place them in environments that do not adequately support their learning or personal development.

Indeed, inclusion is not merely about physical placement but about meaningful participation, quality instruction, and effective individualization (Agran et al., 2020). Without appropriately trained teachers, well-designed Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and access to specialized resources, inclusion can result in academic stagnation or even regression. Bateman and Linden (2012) emphasize the need for legally sound and educationally useful IEPs that align goals with student capabilities and available classroom supports. In cases where these elements are lacking, students with ID may struggle significantly more than if they were placed in more supportive, specialized settings.

Moreover, the assumption that inclusive education is universally beneficial has been contested across various international contexts. For example, Ahrbeck et al. (2018) discussed how both Germany and the United States have witnessed resistance to total inclusion due to a range of concerns, including teacher preparedness, lack of specialized resources, and unclear educational outcomes. In New Brunswick, Canada, where full inclusion is a legal and educational mandate, critics such as Bennett (2017) have described the policy as a "race to the bottom," citing cases where students with severe disabilities were placed in mainstream settings without adequate support, leading to frustration for both students and teachers.

Agran et al. (2020) also found that students with severe disabilities were significantly less likely to be placed in general education settings, despite legal mandates supporting inclusion. The reasons for this include educator attitudes, lack of administrative support, insufficient training, and concerns about academic rigor and classroom management. Their findings suggest that meaningful inclusion requires more than policy mandates; it requires systemic changes in school culture, funding priorities, and professional development practices.

On the other hand, some international examples provide more optimistic perspectives. In Italy, for instance, inclusive education is the norm, and students with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms across all levels. However, researchers such as Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo (2015) argue that while Italy's inclusion model is ideologically sound, empirical support for its effectiveness remains limited due to a scarcity of rigorous, longitudinal studies. Similarly, Begeny and Martens (2007) called for more empirical research on Italy's inclusion practices to validate their academic and social outcomes.

Even in countries with strong legal and ethical commitments to inclusion, such as Norway, challenges persist. Chhabra (2019) compared employment-related disability policies in Norway and India, revealing that despite Norway's inclusive education laws, people with intellectual disabilities continue to face significant barriers in transitioning from school to employment. This indicates a disconnection between inclusive education and long-term life outcomes, an issue that also surfaced in the landmark National Longitudinal Transition Study in the United States (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996), which found limited postsecondary success for youth with ID despite inclusive schooling experiences.

Achieving meaningful inclusion for students with ID depends on multiple interrelated factors. Instructional quality, availability of support personnel, ongoing teacher training, peer acceptance, and individualized goal-setting are all critical. Ainscow (2020) emphasizes the importance of systemic reforms that promote both inclusion and equity, noting that inclusion cannot succeed if it is merely a superficial integration without structural support. Furthermore, the telos—or ultimate purpose—of special education should be considered: whether it aims primarily at academic achievement, social development, life skills, or a combination thereof (Anastasiou, Burke, Wiley, & Kauffman, 2024).

The outcomes of inclusion for students with ID are highly variable and dependent on the conditions under which inclusion is implemented. While the ideology of inclusion is rooted in human rights and social justice, realizing its promises in practice requires significant resources, careful planning, and sustained professional development. Policymakers, educators, and researchers must avoid overgeneralizations and instead adopt a flexible, evidence-based approach that respects individual differences and prioritizes meaningful participation and outcomes.

Comparative and Philosophical Perspectives

Comparative studies on inclusive education reveal a diverse global landscape shaped by distinct cultural, policy, and philosophical frameworks. Countries such as Italy and New Brunswick, Canada, have embraced full inclusion models, yet these approaches have produced mixed results. In Italy, inclusive education is mandated by law, with all students—regardless of disability—expected to attend regular schools. While this model has gained international attention, scholars such as Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo (2015) argue that there is limited empirical evidence supporting its overall effectiveness in improving academic and social outcomes. Similarly, Begeny and Martens (2007) call for more rigorous, outcome-based research to assess the actual impact of full inclusion in Italy, raising concerns about the adequacy of teacher preparation and support systems.

In New Brunswick, Canada, full inclusion is promoted as a foundational principle of the province's education policy. AuCoin, Porter, and Baker-Korotkov (2020) detail how the region undertook systemic reform to ensure that all students, including those with severe disabilities, learn in age-appropriate general education classrooms. While advocates emphasize its commitment to equity and social cohesion, critics argue that inclusion without sufficient support may compromise both teaching quality and student outcomes. For instance, Bennett (2017) and CBC News (2017; 2020) report on parental dissatisfaction and educator burnout due to a lack of resources and clarity in policy implementation. These tensions suggest that inclusion, while aspirational, requires practical alignment with infrastructure, teacher training, and individualized supports.

Empirical research underscores these concerns. Agran et al. (2020) examined why students with severe disabilities are still frequently excluded from general classrooms in spite of inclusive mandates. Their study highlights systemic barriers such as educator attitudes, lack of training, and misaligned accountability metrics. These findings align with Ahrbeck et al. (2018), who caution against pursuing "total inclusion" in countries like Germany and the U.S. without

firm empirical grounding. They advocate for a more balanced approach, integrating special education principles and general education frameworks to ensure that all students receive appropriate instruction.

Philosophically, inclusion is underpinned by human rights and social justice principles. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), reaffirmed by Ainscow, Slee, and Best (2019), remains a seminal document in the global inclusion discourse. It advocates for a restructuring of schools to accommodate all learners and views inclusive education not as a privilege but a fundamental right. Ainscow (2020) further elaborates on how inclusion and equity should drive systemic transformation, arguing that educational change must be context-sensitive and guided by collaborative leadership and reflective practice.

In this vein, the philosophy of inclusive education intersects with broader questions of identity, belonging, and citizenship. Boeren (2019) situates inclusive education within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, emphasizing the need to view quality education through micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (policy) levels. This perspective shifts inclusion from a mere administrative policy to a lived educational experience that affirms diversity and promotes social integration. Bondevik and Bostad (2021) add a pedagogical-philosophical lens, emphasizing the importance of place and relationality in education. They argue that the collaboration between school and home fosters a deeper sense of belonging, challenging institutions to create spaces where students feel seen, heard, and valued.

The concept of inclusion as a form of democratic participation is echoed in the legal and rights-based literature. Anastasiou, Gregory, and Kauffman (2018) provide a critical commentary on Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which guarantees the right to inclusive education. While the article sets a global standard, implementation varies significantly across regions due to differences in interpretation, funding, and legal structures. Degener (2016) and Brennan et al. (2018) argue that while the CRPD has advanced disability rights discourse, the practical challenges of aligning national education systems with its principles remain formidable.

The telos—or ultimate purpose—of special education is another key philosophical concern. Anastasiou, Burke, Wiley, and Kauffman (2024) propose a tripartite model that synthesizes inclusion, individualized instruction, and empirically driven practice. This model recognizes the moral imperative of inclusion while preserving the pedagogical and structural supports essential for students with disabilities to thrive. It avoids reductionist debates by integrating philosophical ideals with educational pragmatism.

Comparative and philosophical perspectives reveal that inclusive education is both a complex practice and a moral commitment. While countries like Italy and New Brunswick demonstrate varying models of full inclusion, their experiences highlight the importance of balancing idealism with empirical evidence and practical support. Philosophically, inclusion is about more than classroom placement—it is about recognizing each student's dignity, fostering genuine belonging, and reforming systems to be more just and equitable. Future research must continue to bridge the gap between aspiration and implementation, ensuring that inclusion fulfills its promise for all learners.

Conclusion:

The United States has made notable strides in promoting the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities, especially through landmark legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These policies have laid the foundation for a more equitable education system by mandating access, protecting rights, and encouraging the integration of students with disabilities into general education settings. Despite this progress, the implementation of inclusive education—particularly for students with severe intellectual disabilities (ID)—remains inconsistent across states, districts, and schools.

Challenges persist in areas such as educator preparedness, appropriate resource allocation, and the development of individualized supports. Many general education teachers report feeling underprepared to meet the complex needs of students with severe ID, often resulting in either inadequate inclusion or unintentional exclusion. Furthermore, structural inequities, varying interpretations of inclusion, and limited data on long-term outcomes contribute to the unevenness of implementation. These gaps highlight the need for more robust teacher training programs, evidence-based instructional strategies, and ongoing professional development.

Sustainable and meaningful inclusion must be grounded in ethical integrity, cultural responsiveness, and a commitment to the dignity of every learner. It requires moving beyond compliance-based approaches toward inclusive practices that are genuinely student-centered and rooted in the belief that all learners, regardless of ability, deserve to participate fully in school and community life.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that track the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of students with severe ID in inclusive settings. Comparative research across states and international contexts can also

shed light on best practices and inform adaptive models of inclusion. Importantly, the voices of students, families, and educators must be central in shaping inclusive policies and practices.

Inclusion must be more than an ideal—it must be a lived reality. Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must work collaboratively to ensure that inclusive education fulfills its promise as both a human right and a practical pathway to equity and belonging for all students.

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