



A Systematic International Review of Special Educational Policy and Practice

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Abstract:

This study examines the conceptualization and operationalization of educational provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) across diverse international contexts. Employing a multi-phase research design, the study employed a systematic literature review to investigate how the “continuum of provision” is interpreted and implemented globally. The findings reveal significant variation in support structures, placement practices, and resource allocation models, indicating a lack of international coherence in approaches to special education. Despite widespread policy commitments to inclusive education, the results highlight a persistent gap between inclusive rhetoric and the continued reliance on segregated practices. The study further identifies an emerging shift toward localized and flexible resource management, enabling more context-responsive support systems. Additionally, the classroom is increasingly recognized as the primary frame for inclusion, emphasizing the importance of strengthening mainstream teaching practices and learning environments to accommodate diverse learner needs. Overall, the research contributes to international debates on inclusive education by clarifying the structural and conceptual tensions underpinning SEN provision and offering insights for developing more coherent, equitable, and responsive educational systems.

Keywords: special educational needs, inclusive education, continuum of provision, international policy

Introduction:

The provision of education for children identified with special educational needs (SEN) raises enduring and complex questions concerning governance, curriculum, assessment, and placement. Across many jurisdictions, responses to learner diversity have historically been organised through a “continuum of provision,” in which students are positioned along a graduated scale of need and corresponding service intensity.

Although international policy discourse increasingly promotes inclusion as a guiding principle, comparative scholarship has repeatedly shown that countries differ significantly in how they define, categorise, and support SEN



(D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009; Vlachou, 2004). These differences reflect not only technical variation in systems design but also deeper epistemological and cultural divergences about disability, entitlement, and the purposes of schooling.

A growing body of international review literature has attempted to map these divergences. Comparative analyses of policy and practice have demonstrated both the persistence of segregated structures and the complexity of reform efforts (Rix et al., 2013a; Rix et al., 2013b). Similarly, reviews commissioned by national agencies, such as Winter and O'Raw (2010), highlight tensions between inclusive principles and established systems of categorisation and resourcing. Research focusing on specific learner groups, including autistic students (Parsons et al., 2009), further illustrates how evidence of "best practice" is frequently mediated by national traditions, funding arrangements, and professional training structures.

Beyond SEN-specific scholarship, broader work on educational reform underscores the role of research, teacher preparation, and policy translation in shaping classroom practice. For example, Tatto (2015) argues that the relationship between research and teacher education is central to systemic quality and coherence. In the field of inclusive and special education, debates have emerged regarding whether existing theoretical frameworks adequately explain contemporary policy developments, with calls for renewed theorisation of inclusive special education (Hornby, 2014).

Together, these studies suggest that what appears to be a shared international vocabulary of inclusion may conceal substantial differences in interpretation and enactment. Against this backdrop, the present research responds to the need for a systematic and internationally comparative analysis of how the "continuum of provision" is conceptualised and operationalised. Rather than assuming a stable or universally understood model, the study interrogates how the continuum is constructed in policy texts, organisational structures, and decision-making processes across diverse administrations. In doing so, it builds on and extends earlier international reviews by examining not only formal policy commitments but also the mechanisms through which provision is allocated, managed, and experienced.

Specifically, the research aims to: (1) create a descriptive map of international research on the notion of the educational continuum; (2) examine how provision is conceptualised and enacted across a wide range of global administrations; and (3) identify implications for the development of more coherent and inclusive educational systems. Through this multi-layered approach, the study seeks to clarify the assumptions underpinning contemporary SEN provision and to contribute to ongoing debates about how inclusive education can move beyond rhetoric toward structurally and pedagogically meaningful reform.

Literature review:

The international literature on special educational needs (SEN) has consistently highlighted the complexity of defining and organising provision across diverse educational systems. Early analyses of inclusive policy-making emphasised that inclusion is not a neutral technical reform but a political and ideological project shaped by competing understandings of disability and equity (Vlachou, 2004).

Comparative scholars have further questioned whether countries are "talking about the same thing" when they invoke inclusion, noting substantial variation in categorisation systems, placement practices, and accountability frameworks (D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009). This body of work suggests that apparent policy convergence often masks deeper structural and epistemological divergence.

A significant strand of research has focused specifically on mapping international approaches to SEN provision. Comprehensive reviews by Rix et al. (2013a, 2013b) examined how different jurisdictions conceptualise and operationalise the "continuum of provision," revealing wide disparities in placement models, funding mechanisms, and decision-making processes. Similarly, Winter and O'Raw (2010) synthesised literature on inclusive principles and practices, identifying tensions between rights-based rhetoric and enduring segregated structures. These reviews collectively demonstrate that while inclusive education has become a dominant policy narrative, its enactment remains uneven and context-dependent.



Research examining “best practice” for particular learner groups has further complicated the picture. International reviews of provision for children on the autism spectrum (Parsons et al., 2009; 2011) indicate that evidence-based strategies are often embedded within broader systemic arrangements that vary considerably between countries. Rather than identifying universally transferable models, these studies show that pedagogical effectiveness is mediated by teacher expertise, resource allocation, and cultural expectations. Broader literature reviews of SEN (Alkahtani, 2016) and inclusive early childhood practices (Alzahrani, 2020) similarly conclude that implementation gaps persist despite widespread endorsement of inclusion.

National policy analyses illustrate how these tensions play out within specific systems. In Australia, document reviews have revealed the persistence of exclusionary practices within ostensibly inclusive policy frameworks (Iacono et al., 2019), while reforms in Queensland highlight the challenges of translating inclusive ideals into school-level practice (Bourke, 2010). In Sweden, historical analyses trace how special education narratives have shifted over time yet continue to reproduce categorical distinctions (Hjorne, 2018). In Portugal, efforts to embed the International Classification of Functioning within legislation illustrate attempts to align policy with biopsychosocial models of disability (Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013). Meanwhile, developments in special teacher education in China demonstrate how national reform trajectories are shaped by political priorities and professional traditions (Wang & Mu, 2014).

The relationship between research, teacher education, and classroom practice has emerged as a critical concern within this literature. Tatto (2015) argues that high-quality teacher preparation is central to system coherence and reform sustainability. However, longstanding concerns about the “research-to-practice gap” in special education (Greenwood & Abbott, 2001) suggest that evidence does not automatically translate into classroom change. This disjunction reflects structural barriers, professional cultures, and policy constraints that mediate how inclusive practices are enacted.

Theoretical debates have also questioned whether existing conceptual frameworks are sufficient to explain contemporary developments. Hornby (2014) contends that inclusive special education requires a new theoretical synthesis capable of reconciling evidence-based intervention with systemic inclusion. Across the literature, scholars note that traditional categorical models coexist uneasily with ecological and rights-based perspectives. The persistence of the “continuum of provision” as a structuring metaphor illustrates this tension, as it simultaneously signals flexibility and maintains hierarchical assumptions about need and placement.

Comparative education research outside the SEN field provides additional insight into the policy–practice divide. Studies of reform in other sectors, such as tourism education (Amoah & Baum, 1997), highlight how policy aspirations frequently diverge from implementation realities. Such analyses underscore the importance of examining not only formal legislation but also institutional cultures, resource flows, and accountability systems. Applied to SEN, this perspective suggests that inclusive discourse must be analysed in relation to the organisational logics that sustain or resist change.

Taken together, the literature reveals a field characterised by conceptual ambiguity, structural persistence, and uneven reform trajectories. International reviews document variation in how the continuum of provision is interpreted and enacted, while national case studies expose the resilience of established systems.

Research on teacher education and implementation further demonstrates that inclusive transformation depends on more than policy declarations. Yet, despite this substantial body of scholarship, there remains a need for systematic, large-scale comparative analysis that integrates conceptual mapping, policy review, and practice-level evidence. The present study addresses this gap by examining how the continuum of provision is constructed and operationalised across multiple administrations, and by interrogating the assumptions that underpin contemporary approaches to special educational provision.

Methodology:

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design to examine international policies and practices related to special educational needs (SEN). The systematic literature review approach was selected because it provides



a structured, transparent, and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research evidence across diverse educational contexts.

This design enabled a comprehensive analysis of how special education policies are conceptualized and implemented globally, with particular emphasis on the continuum of provision, governance structures, resource allocation, and classroom practices. The review followed established systematic procedures, including protocol development, database searching, screening and selection of studies, quality appraisal, and thematic synthesis to ensure methodological rigor and reduce selection bias.

A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed literature and policy-related publications was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search focused on studies published in English that addressed international special education policy and practice. Key search terms included combinations of “special educational needs,” “SEN,” “inclusive education,” “special education policy,” “continuum of provision,” “international education policy,” “inclusive practices,” “educational provision,” and “comparative education.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to refine the search results. In addition, reference lists of selected articles were examined to identify further relevant studies through backward citation searching.

The selection of studies was guided by predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Studies were included if they addressed special education or inclusive education policy and practice, focused on international or comparative contexts, and consisted of empirical research, policy analyses, or theoretical discussions related to educational provision. Peer-reviewed articles and official policy reports written in English were considered. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on medical or clinical interventions, examined classroom-level interventions without policy relevance, consisted of non-peer-reviewed opinion papers or editorials, or were duplicate publications. The screening process involved an initial review of titles and abstracts followed by full-text assessment to confirm eligibility.

The study selection followed a multi-stage screening procedure. The initial search yielded 2,372 records, from which duplicates were removed. Titles and abstracts were then screened for relevance, and full-text evaluation was conducted for potentially eligible studies based on the inclusion criteria. A total of 341 publications met the criteria and were included in the final analysis, consisting of both theoretical discussions and policy-focused research.

A structured data extraction framework was used to systematically record relevant information from each selected study. Extracted data included the country or administrative context, policy frameworks and governance structures, conceptualizations of special educational provision, placement and support models, resource allocation mechanisms, implementation practices, and reported outcomes and challenges. This standardized process ensured consistency and facilitated cross-study comparison.

To ensure methodological rigor, selected studies were evaluated using quality appraisal criteria focusing on clarity of research design, methodological transparency, data validity, and relevance to policy and practice. Only studies meeting acceptable quality standards were retained for synthesis. The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, in which findings were coded and grouped into recurring conceptual patterns related to the continuum of provision, governance systems, resource allocation, and pedagogical practices.

Through iterative comparison, themes were organized into broader categories representing international trends and variations in special education policy and practice. Cross-national comparisons were conducted to identify similarities and differences in policy implementation, support structures, and placement practices across educational systems, allowing the study to identify underlying assumptions, systemic patterns, and implications for inclusive education reform.

Since the study relied exclusively on publicly available literature and policy documents, no direct human participants were involved. All sources were properly cited and acknowledged to ensure academic integrity and ethical research practice.

Findings and Discussion:



Conceptualizations of the Continuum

The findings of the systematic review revealed significant diversity in how the “continuum of provision” is conceptualized across international special education policy and practice. The literature identified twenty-nine distinct forms of continua, which were organized into six major thematic categories: continua of space, staffing, students, support, strategies, and systems.

These conceptual variations demonstrate that the continuum is not a singular or universally understood framework but rather a flexible construct shaped by national policy traditions, educational philosophies, and governance structures. The multiplicity of interpretations reflects broader debates in inclusive education concerning the nature of disability, entitlement, and educational equity (Vlachou, 2004; D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009).

The first theme, continua of space, refers to the locations or settings where educational support is provided, ranging from mainstream classrooms to specialized units, separate schools, and home-based instruction. This spatial dimension reflects the traditional model of service delivery based on placement decisions, which remains prevalent despite the increasing policy emphasis on inclusion. Research suggests that such spatial arrangements often reveal tensions between inclusive ideals and established institutional structures (Iacono et al., 2019; Hjørne, 2018). While some educational systems promote full inclusion within mainstream settings, others maintain segregated provisions justified by perceived differences in learner needs or resource constraints.

The second theme, continua of staffing, focuses on the personnel responsible for delivering support and the distribution of their roles and responsibilities. This includes variations in teacher specialization, collaborative teaching models, and support staff involvement. The findings highlight the growing importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in special education, reflecting international calls for improved teacher preparation and professional development to support inclusive practice (Tatto, 2015).

However, disparities in staffing structures across countries suggest that teacher expertise, workload allocation, and professional training significantly influence the effectiveness of inclusive education systems. The third theme, continua of students, concerns how learners are identified, categorized, and prioritized for support. Different educational systems employ varying classification frameworks based on diagnosis, functional ability, or educational need, reflecting diverse theoretical perspectives on disability and inclusion. Previous research emphasizes that such categorization practices can reinforce hierarchical assumptions about learners while shaping access to resources and services (Hornby, 2014; Alkahtani, 2016). The review indicates that although some countries are moving toward needs-based models, categorical approaches remain deeply embedded in many policy frameworks.

The fourth theme, continua of support, relates to the type, intensity, and duration of assistance provided to learners with special educational needs. This includes individualized interventions, resource allocation models, and differentiated instruction strategies. The findings demonstrate substantial variation in how support is distributed, with some systems adopting individualized funding mechanisms while others emphasize universal provision. Research on effective practices for specific learner groups, such as children on the autism spectrum, suggests that support strategies are often shaped by systemic and contextual factors rather than universally applicable models (Parsons et al., 2011; Alzahrani, 2020).

The fifth theme, continua of strategies, highlights the range and development of pedagogical approaches used to support diverse learners. The review found limited evidence of specialized pedagogies uniquely associated with specific disability categories. Instead, effective practice typically involved differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and multimodal teaching approaches. This finding aligns with research emphasizing the importance of adaptable teaching methods and teacher attitudes in promoting inclusive education (Avramidis et al., 2000; Lindsay, 2007). It also reflects ongoing concerns regarding the research-to-practice gap, where evidence-based strategies are not consistently implemented in classroom settings (Greenwood & Abbott, 2001).

The sixth theme, continua of systems, encompasses broader governance structures, policy frameworks, and evaluation mechanisms that shape special education provision. These systemic factors include funding models, accountability processes, and legislative frameworks that influence decision-making at institutional and classroom levels.



Comparative policy research indicates that differences in governance arrangements significantly affect how inclusive education is implemented and sustained (Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013; Wang & Mu, 2014). The findings suggest that systemic organization plays a critical role in mediating the relationship between policy intentions and educational practice.

Across these six themes, the review highlights the persistence of structural and cultural factors that shape the organization of special education systems. National case studies demonstrate that policy reforms often coexist with longstanding institutional practices that resist change (Bourke, 2010; Ackah-Jnr, 2020). Similar policy–practice tensions have been observed in other sectors, where reform initiatives frequently encounter organizational and professional barriers (Amoah & Baum, 1997; Grapragasem et al., 2014). These findings underscore the importance of examining not only policy rhetoric but also the institutional conditions that influence implementation.

The diversity of conceptualizations also reflects broader global dynamics, including processes of globalization, cultural exchange, and policy transfer. Educational systems adapt international frameworks to local contexts, resulting in varied interpretations of inclusive education principles (Karim, 2021; Lin & Martin, 2005). Comparative studies of policy development across different sectors similarly demonstrate how global policy discourse interacts with national traditions and priorities (Williamson, 2002; Osler & Starkey, 2006).

In the context of special education, this interaction contributes to both convergence in terminology and divergence in practice. The findings reveal that the continuum of provision functions as a multidimensional framework that reflects competing priorities between inclusion, specialization, and system efficiency. Rather than representing a unified model, the continuum embodies diverse approaches to organizing educational support across international contexts.

The results support earlier claims that inclusive education remains a complex and evolving field characterized by conceptual ambiguity and uneven implementation (D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009; Hornby, 2014). These insights highlight the need for clearer theoretical frameworks, stronger policy coherence, and sustained efforts to bridge the gap between inclusive ideals and educational practice.

International Placement Patterns

Despite the widespread adoption of inclusive education rhetoric, the “classic” continuum of provision—ranging from mainstream classroom placement to special schools and home-based support—remains dominant across most educational systems examined in this study. This traditional model continues to structure decision-making regarding learner placement, reflecting the persistence of hierarchical approaches to support. While many countries formally endorse inclusive principles, actual placement practices often demonstrate a reliance on established institutional arrangements, highlighting a persistent gap between policy aspirations and implementation realities (Ackah-Jnr, 2020; Burch, 2007).

The vignette analysis revealed substantial variation in placement decisions across countries. For example, Italy and Norway consistently placed learners in mainstream educational settings across all vignette scenarios, reflecting strong national commitments to inclusive education. In contrast, Japan and Kenya demonstrated a greater reliance on specialized settings, including separate classrooms or special schools. These differences suggest that national policy frameworks, cultural values, and resource structures significantly influence placement decisions and the interpretation of inclusive education principles.

The persistence of diverse placement models reflects broader tensions between inclusion and specialization in educational systems. Research indicates that inclusive placement is shaped not only by legislative frameworks but also by professional beliefs, institutional traditions, and practical considerations such as resource availability and teacher preparedness (Avramidis et al., 2000; Lindsay, 2007). Consequently, placement practices often represent negotiated outcomes between policy mandates and contextual constraints rather than direct implementations of inclusive ideology.

These findings also reflect broader patterns observed in international policy implementation across sectors, where formal commitments to reform do not necessarily result in uniform practice. Studies examining policy implementation in fields such as tourism education and higher education demonstrate similar discrepancies between policy intentions



and institutional practice, emphasizing the complexity of translating reform agendas into operational realities (Amoah & Baum, 1997; Grapragasem et al., 2014). Within special education, this policy–practice divide underscores the importance of examining structural and organizational factors that shape placement decisions.

Globalization and cross-cultural exchange further influence how educational systems interpret and enact inclusive placement policies. Educational reforms are often shaped by international policy discourse while simultaneously reflecting local cultural, social, and institutional contexts (Karim, 2021; Lin & Martin, 2005). As a result, countries may adopt similar inclusive terminology while maintaining distinct approaches to learner placement, contributing to both convergence in policy language and divergence in practice.

Resource allocation and financing mechanisms also play a critical role in shaping placement patterns. Comparative research across policy domains demonstrates that funding structures significantly influence service delivery models and institutional behavior (Alaerts, 2019). In special education, systems with flexible or decentralized funding arrangements may be more capable of supporting inclusive placements, whereas resource limitations or rigid funding structures may encourage reliance on segregated provisions.

Institutional and organizational dynamics further mediate the implementation of inclusive placement policies. Institutional theory suggests that established practices and organizational norms often shape policy enactment, sometimes limiting transformative change (Burch, 2007). Evidence from various national contexts, including studies of inclusive education implementation in diverse settings such as Singapore and Eswatini, highlights the challenges of aligning policy goals with existing institutional capacities and professional practices (Walker & Musti-Rao, 2016; Thwala, 2026). These challenges reinforce the complexity of achieving consistent inclusive placement across educational systems.

The international placement patterns identified in this study demonstrate that the continuum of provision remains a central organizing framework in special education, despite evolving policy discourse emphasizing inclusion. The variation in placement practices reflects the interaction of policy frameworks, cultural contexts, resource structures, and institutional dynamics. These findings suggest that advancing inclusive education requires not only policy reform but also sustained attention to systemic conditions, professional development, and organizational change to ensure that inclusive principles are meaningfully translated into practice across diverse educational contexts.

Resource and Support Models

The findings reveal that countries employ a wide range of funding and resource allocation mechanisms to support learners with special educational needs, reflecting diverse policy priorities and governance structures. Three dominant models emerged across the literature: block funding or annual formula-based allocations directed to schools, individualized assessment models in which resources follow the child, and universal allocation approaches that provide additional support regardless of specific diagnosis. These models represent different assumptions about equity, efficiency, and responsibility in educational provision, highlighting the complexity of designing resource systems that balance inclusion with accountability (Ball, 1998; Burch, 2007).

Block funding models, in which resources are allocated to schools through predetermined formulas, aim to provide institutions with flexibility in addressing diverse learner needs. This approach allows schools to distribute resources based on contextual demands and organizational priorities. However, research suggests that such models may produce inconsistent outcomes depending on institutional capacity and leadership practices (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012).

Institutional theory further explains that organizational norms and existing practices often shape how allocated resources are utilized, potentially reinforcing established patterns rather than promoting transformative inclusive practices (Burch, 2007). Individualized funding models, where resources follow the child based on assessment outcomes, emphasize targeted intervention and accountability.

These approaches typically rely on diagnostic procedures and individualized education plans to determine support levels. While individualized allocation can ensure that learners receive tailored assistance, it may also reinforce categorical identification and bureaucratic processes that shape access to services (Serpell & Jere-Folotiya, 2011). Studies of effective inclusive practice suggest that while individualized support is beneficial, overreliance on



diagnostic frameworks may limit broader systemic efforts to develop inclusive learning environments (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016).

Universal allocation models represent an alternative approach that prioritizes equitable access to support by providing resources without requiring formal diagnosis. These systems aim to reduce stigmatization and promote inclusive classroom environments by ensuring that all learners can access additional support when needed. Research on inclusive education policy implementation indicates that universal approaches may foster more collaborative and responsive learning environments, although their effectiveness depends on teacher capacity and institutional readiness (Walker & Musti-Rao, 2016; Mavropoulou et al., 2021).

The findings also highlight the role of localized control in resource management, particularly in contexts such as Italy and Norway, where decentralized governance structures allow schools and local authorities to allocate resources flexibly. Such arrangements enable more responsive decision-making tailored to local needs and educational contexts. Studies examining special needs education practice in Norwegian settings demonstrate that localized control can support the implementation of inclusive principles by allowing adaptive responses to learner diversity (Hannås & Bahdanovich Hanssen, 2016). However, decentralization also requires strong coordination mechanisms to ensure consistency and equity across regions.

Broader comparative research suggests that resource allocation models are shaped by global policy trends and local sociocultural contexts. Educational reforms are often influenced by international policy discourses while reflecting national priorities and institutional traditions (Nunan, 2003; Hornberger, 2009). Similar dynamics are observed across other policy domains, such as gender-sensitive education, refugee education, and mobile learning initiatives, where funding mechanisms and support structures are adapted to address diverse educational challenges (Maluwa-Banda, 2004; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Kaliisa & Michelle, 2019). These patterns illustrate how global frameworks interact with local implementation processes.

The translation of resource policies into practice remains a significant challenge across educational systems. Evidence from multiple contexts demonstrates that discrepancies often arise between policy design and actual implementation due to institutional constraints, professional practices, and organizational cultures (Burriss & Burriss, 2011). Such policy-practice gaps highlight the importance of examining not only funding structures but also the institutional conditions and professional capacities that shape how resources are utilized in educational settings.

The diversity of resource and support models reflects the complexity of balancing equity, efficiency, and inclusion in special education systems. While block funding, individualized allocation, and universal provision each offer distinct advantages, their effectiveness depends on broader systemic factors, including governance structures, institutional capacity, and professional expertise. The findings suggest that successful resource management requires integrated policy approaches that align funding mechanisms with inclusive pedagogical practices and organizational support structures, thereby strengthening the capacity of educational systems to respond effectively to learner diversity.

The Resistance of Established Systems

The findings of the study reveal that established educational systems often demonstrate significant resistance to policy reforms aimed at transforming traditional models of special education provision. Even when policymakers advocate for more inclusive frameworks and attempt to move away from hierarchical continua of provision, entrenched institutional structures, professional practices, and cultural assumptions frequently limit meaningful change.

This resistance reflects the persistence of established organizational routines and deeply embedded beliefs about learner ability, educational placement, and the delivery of support services. As a result, reforms promoting inclusive education are often mediated by existing institutional logics that shape how policies are interpreted and implemented in practice.

The persistence of traditional practices can be attributed to the stability of institutional structures within educational systems. Schools and educational organizations operate within historically developed frameworks that influence decision-making processes, professional roles, and pedagogical approaches. These structures often prioritize continuity and predictability, making systemic transformation difficult to achieve. Consequently, even when policy



directives emphasize inclusive practices, institutional norms and existing operational procedures may reinforce conventional approaches to teaching and learner placement.

Evidence from the Norwegian context illustrates how established pedagogical traditions can influence the implementation of inclusive policies. Despite strong national commitments to inclusion and equitable education, the study found that traditional classroom methods sometimes took precedence over collaborative and differentiated pedagogical approaches. This reliance on established instructional practices reflects the challenges educators face in adopting new teaching models that require significant shifts in professional identity, classroom organization, and instructional strategies. The findings suggest that policy change alone is insufficient to transform practice without corresponding changes in professional culture and institutional support.

The resistance of established systems also reflects broader challenges associated with translating policy into practice. Educational reforms often require not only structural adjustments but also changes in professional knowledge, beliefs, and competencies. Teachers and school leaders may encounter practical constraints such as limited training, insufficient resources, and increased workload demands, which can hinder the adoption of innovative approaches.

These factors contribute to a gradual rather than immediate transformation of practice, reinforcing the persistence of traditional educational models despite reform efforts. Comparative research further demonstrates that policy implementation is shaped by sociocultural and political contexts that influence educational priorities and practices. For example, studies of minority language policy in China highlight how national education systems often struggle to reconcile reform initiatives with established cultural and institutional traditions, emphasizing the need for broader multicultural approaches to support meaningful change (Wang & Phillion, 2009). Such findings suggest that resistance to reform is not unique to special education but reflects wider systemic challenges in educational policy transformation.

The findings also indicate that resistance to change is linked to the complexity of balancing competing educational goals, including standardization, accountability, and inclusion. Educational systems must negotiate tensions between maintaining established standards of performance and adopting flexible, learner-centered approaches. These competing priorities can lead institutions to favor familiar practices that ensure stability and predictability, even when alternative models are promoted through policy reforms. Consequently, inclusive education initiatives may be implemented selectively or incrementally rather than comprehensively.

The study highlights that the resistance of established systems represents a significant barrier to the realization of inclusive education goals. Transforming special education provision requires not only policy reform but also sustained efforts to reshape institutional cultures, professional practices, and organizational structures. Addressing this resistance involves strengthening teacher preparation, promoting collaborative pedagogies, and developing supportive institutional environments that encourage innovation and flexibility. Without such systemic changes, traditional approaches to educational provision are likely to persist, limiting the effectiveness of inclusive education reforms.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that global special education provision operates as a largely “discordant system,” in which educational practitioners and policymakers employ a shared language of inclusion while working within differing conceptual, structural, and cultural assumptions. Although international discourse promotes inclusive education as a guiding principle, its interpretation and implementation vary significantly across educational systems. The persistence of diverse continua of provision, resource allocation models, and placement practices reflects the influence of national traditions, institutional structures, and professional practices. Consequently, inclusive education remains characterized by uneven reform trajectories, conceptual ambiguity, and a continuing gap between policy rhetoric and practice.

The findings suggest several key implications for policy and practice. First, rather than pursuing uniformity through centralized bureaucratic structures, policy efforts should prioritize translation across systems. Training “key personnel” capable of facilitating collaboration among education, health, and social service sectors is essential for ensuring coherent support for learners with special educational needs. Such an approach recognizes the complexity of



educational provision and emphasizes coordination, communication, and contextual responsiveness over rigid standardization.

Second, the study highlights the central role of the classroom as the primary site of inclusion. Policies and resources should focus on strengthening the capacity of mainstream classrooms to respond effectively to learner diversity. This includes investing in teacher professional development, collaborative teaching models, flexible learning environments, and differentiated instructional strategies. By enhancing classroom-level responsiveness, educational systems can move beyond placement-focused approaches toward more meaningful participation and engagement for all learners.

Third, the research underscores the need to actively involve students in decisions affecting their educational experiences. The review identified a significant global lack of student voice in decisions related to educational placement and Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). Promoting student participation aligns with rights-based approaches to education and supports more responsive and individualized learning processes.

Advancing inclusive education requires sustained systemic reform that addresses institutional cultures, professional practices, and governance structures. Greater policy coherence, collaborative frameworks, and learner-centered approaches are essential to bridging the gap between inclusive ideals and practice, thereby fostering more equitable and responsive educational systems worldwide.

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