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# Implementation Gap: A Review of Inclusive Principles and Classroom Practices

**DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18831324**

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## **Abstract:**

Inclusive education has been widely promoted through international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), establishing a global agenda that emphasizes the right of all children to access quality education. Despite these mandates, a persistent “implementation gap” exists between policy intentions and classroom realities. This systematic review synthesizes national and international literature to examine both the core principles of inclusive education and the practical strategies necessary for translating these principles into effective classroom practice. The review identifies key principles, including ongoing responsiveness to diversity, barrier removal, meaningful participation, and a focus on at-risk learners. At the practical level, implementation requires inclusive school policies, individualized education plans, collaborative staffing, differentiated curricula, and engagement with external support services. Findings indicate that while the conceptual foundations of inclusion are well-established, practical application is frequently constrained by rigid curricula, limited teacher preparedness, negative attitudes, and inadequate systemic support. The study underscores the need for a holistic, whole-school approach in which policy, pedagogy, leadership, and resources converge to ensure equitable and meaningful learning outcomes for all students.

*Keywords:* Inclusive education, implementation gap, inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, teacher education, whole-school approach

## **Introduction:**

Inclusive education has undergone a significant transformation from the "orthodoxy of segregated education" toward a holistic model that asserts the right of all children to learn together, regardless of ability or background. This paradigm shift is rooted in a rights-based perspective, which frames exclusionary practices as morally and socially unacceptable (King-Sears, 1997; Salend, 2010). Scholars emphasize that true inclusion requires more than physical placement; it demands systemic and pedagogical approaches that enable meaningful participation and achievement for all learners (Winter & O’Raw, 2010; Dewsbury & Brame, 2019).

International policy has played a pivotal role in shaping inclusive education. The Salamanca Statement (1994) is widely regarded as the “clearest and most unequivocal call” for inclusive education, urging governments to prioritize systems that accommodate all children (Inos & Quigley, 1995). Similarly, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) places the responsibility on states to ensure that students with disabilities are not excluded from mainstream educational settings, emphasizing both legal and ethical obligations (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024). These documents establish a global mandate, providing a foundation for inclusive practice worldwide.

Despite these policy directives, achieving full inclusion remains an ongoing challenge. Scholars note that inclusion is often an “elusive concept,” complicated by debates on how to reconcile mainstream and special education systems into a unified framework that addresses diverse needs (Singh & Pallai, 2023; De Vroeya et al., 2016).

This tension highlights the disconnect between the aspirational ideals of international mandates and the practical realities faced by educators, students, and families. The term “Implementation Gap” has emerged to describe this disconnect, representing the persistent divergence between policy intent and classroom practice. Research indicates that this gap manifests in rigid curricula, limited teacher preparation, insufficient resources, and systemic barriers that impede collaborative, individualized instruction (Winter & O’Raw, 2010; Dewsbury & Brame, 2019). Effectively closing the gap requires understanding not only what inclusion entails in principle but also how it can be operationalized in diverse classroom contexts (King-Sears, 1997; Salend, 2010).

In light of these challenges, examining both the theoretical foundations and practical strategies of inclusion is essential. A systematic review of international literature and practice inventories provides insights into how schools can move from policy toward meaningful action, emphasizing the interplay of pedagogy, school culture, and collaborative support systems. By bridging the gap between principle and practice, educators can create classrooms where every learner has the opportunity to participate fully, achieve personal goals, and develop a sense of belonging (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024; Singh & Pallai, 2023).

### **Literature Review:**

Inclusive education has evolved into a global priority, emphasizing the right of all children, regardless of ability, to learn together in mainstream classrooms. Early scholarship highlighted the moral and social imperatives of inclusion, emphasizing that segregated educational models perpetuate inequality and limit participation (King-Sears, 1997; Inos & Quigley, 1995).

The paradigm has shifted from focusing solely on access to fostering meaningful engagement, participation, and achievement for all students, signaling a move toward holistic educational frameworks (Winter & O’Raw, 2010; Salend, 2010). Research on inclusive pedagogy underscores that successful inclusion is more than physical integration; it requires adapting teaching approaches to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Florian (2008) argued for “inclusive pedagogy,” which positions variability as a norm and encourages teachers to anticipate differences in learners’ needs rather than retrofitting support. Dewsbury and Brame (2019) similarly emphasize active engagement, flexible assessment, and multimodal instructional strategies as essential elements for fostering inclusive learning environments. These approaches are grounded in the recognition that quality teaching, rather than mere placement, determines positive educational outcomes.

Curricular differentiation and individualization are widely recognized as critical practices in inclusive classrooms. Lindner and Schwab (2025) highlighted that tailoring content, process, and assessment to students’ diverse abilities enhances participation and achievement. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) remain central to operationalizing these adaptations, ensuring that learners receive targeted support without feeling segregated (Singh & Pallai, 2023; Salend, 2010). Penner (2018) further notes that differentiated instruction must be dynamic, reflecting ongoing assessment and adjustment to maximize each student’s engagement.

Teacher attitudes, preparation, and professional development are recurrent themes in the literature as key determinants of successful inclusion. King-Sears (1997) and De Vroeya et al. (2016) argue that negative teacher perceptions and insufficient training remain significant barriers. Lawrie et al. (2017) synthesized recent studies demonstrating that

inclusive teaching is not intuitive but requires structured professional development that cultivates both knowledge and confidence to implement inclusive strategies effectively.

Inclusive classroom climate is equally crucial in supporting student participation. Margas (2023) emphasizes that fostering a positive, collaborative, and respectful environment underpins all other inclusive practices. Collaborative learning, peer support, and social-emotional development are highlighted as essential for creating a sense of belonging, reducing stigma, and promoting equity in classroom interactions (Kefallinou, Symeonidou, & Meijer, 2020; Alzahran, 2020).

Despite widespread recognition of inclusion as a principle, persistent systemic challenges hinder its implementation. Bindhani and Gopinath (2024) identified barriers including rigid curricula, limited funding, inadequate staffing, and insufficient integration of external support services. Similarly, Isyatirradhiyah et al. (2025) observed that policy directives often fail to translate into practice, reflecting a disconnect between high-level mandates and classroom realities. These challenges underscore the need for systemic reform alongside pedagogical innovation.

Global research emphasizes the importance of integrating mainstream education with specialized supports to enhance inclusive outcomes. Winter and O'Raw (2010) highlighted that coordination between classroom teachers, special educators, and external professionals (e.g., psychologists, therapists) strengthens both participation and achievement. Singh and Pallai (2023) further noted that collaborative teaching models, such as team-teaching and co-planning, enhance instructional responsiveness and allow for flexible deployment of resources in diverse classrooms.

Recent literature also highlights the value of evidence-based strategies and international frameworks in guiding inclusive practice. Alzahran (2020) and De Vroeya et al. (2016) emphasize using structured inventories, indices, and self-review tools to monitor progress and identify barriers. Lindner and Schwab (2025) and Florian (2008) stress that combining research-based pedagogical strategies with reflective practice ensures that inclusion is implemented not as a policy requirement but as an effective, evolving educational approach.

The literature converges on the understanding that inclusive education is both a systemic and pedagogical endeavor. Effective inclusion requires aligned policies, flexible curricula, teacher competence, collaborative school culture, and individualized strategies that collectively foster participation, achievement, and belonging (Penner, 2018; Salend, 2010; Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024; Kefallinou et al., 2020). Closing the "implementation gap" demands that schools move beyond access-focused inclusion toward creating environments where all learners can meaningfully engage and succeed.

### **Methodology:**

This study employed a systematic review design to explore the gap between the principles of inclusive education and their implementation in classroom practice. The research was conducted in two complementary strands, each designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of both theoretical foundations and practical applications.

The first strand, literature synthesis, involved an extensive review of national and international sources to examine the background, definitions, and core principles of inclusive education. Seminal works, including those by Ainscow (1999) and Florian (1998), were analyzed alongside international policy frameworks, such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). This strand aimed to establish a conceptual baseline, identifying the fundamental elements of inclusion and how they have been articulated across different contexts and educational systems.

The second strand focused on framework construction through a detailed analysis of over 25 international inventories of inclusive practice, drawn from countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States. These inventories, which documented school policies, teaching strategies, and support mechanisms, were subjected to qualitative content analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The purpose of this analysis was to bridge the gap between policy-level principles and practical classroom strategies, highlighting common practices that facilitate effective inclusion and identifying areas where implementation challenges persist.

By integrating these two strands, the study provided both a theoretical and empirical perspective on inclusive education, offering a framework that captures the essential principles, practical strategies, and systemic considerations necessary for bridging the “implementation gap” in diverse educational settings.

## **Findings and Discussion:**

### **Core Principles (The "Ideal")**

The international literature consistently identifies a set of core principles that underpin inclusive education, representing the ideal toward which schools and educators strive. These principles provide both a conceptual foundation and a practical guide for designing classrooms and educational systems that accommodate all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning needs (Kaur, Noman, & Awang-Hashim, 2016).

The first principle, process, emphasizes that inclusion is not a fixed state but an ongoing journey. Schools and educators are encouraged to continually seek better ways of responding to student diversity, adapting policies, teaching strategies, and support mechanisms as needs evolve. This perspective frames inclusion as dynamic, requiring reflection, flexibility, and sustained effort over time (Kaur et al., 2016).

Barrier removal constitutes the second principle, highlighting the importance of identifying and addressing obstacles that limit access, participation, or achievement. These barriers may be physical, social, attitudinal, or systemic. By constantly evaluating classroom practices and institutional policies, educators can implement targeted interventions to reduce inequities and create a more enabling environment for all students (Kaur et al., 2016).

The third principle, presence, participation, and achievement, expands the understanding of inclusion beyond mere physical attendance. Presence refers to students being enrolled and attending school, but true inclusion requires meaningful participation in learning activities and the opportunity to achieve personal and academic goals. This principle underscores that quality experiences and active engagement are as important as access itself, ensuring that all learners benefit equitably from the educational process (Kaur et al., 2016).

A fourth key principle is the emphasis on at-risk groups, which draws attention to students who are particularly vulnerable to marginalization, exclusion, or underachievement. These groups may include learners with disabilities, those from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds, or students experiencing social or emotional challenges. By prioritizing support for these learners, schools can promote equity and reduce systemic disparities (Kaur et al., 2016).

The literature further emphasizes that these principles are interconnected rather than discrete. For example, removing barriers enhances participation, while a focus on at-risk groups informs both the process and strategies for barrier removal. Understanding this interdependence allows educators to design more holistic and coherent approaches to inclusion that address both structural and instructional dimensions (Kaur et al., 2016).

Implementing these principles effectively requires institutional commitment and professional readiness. Teacher preparation programs, school leadership policies, and professional development initiatives must align with the values of inclusion, ensuring that educators are equipped to translate these ideals into classroom practice (Kaur et al., 2016). Without such alignment, the principles risk remaining aspirational rather than operational.

The core principles of inclusion provide a vision of equitable education that balances access, quality, and responsiveness. While challenges in implementation persist, these ideals serve as benchmarks for both policymakers and practitioners, guiding the creation of learning environments where all students can participate fully, achieve meaningful outcomes, and experience a sense of belonging (Kaur et al., 2016).

### **Practical Themes for Implementation**

The analysis of international inventories of inclusive practice revealed several practical themes that are essential for translating the principles of inclusion into effective classroom and school strategies. These themes highlight the ways in which schools operationalize inclusive policies, teaching practices, and support systems to meet the diverse needs of learners (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Kaur, Noman, & Awang-Hashim, 2016).

The first theme, inclusive school policies, emphasizes the development of admission and administrative policies that are open to all students without discrimination. Inclusive policies create the structural foundation for equity, ensuring that students with disabilities or other learning differences have equal access to education and that schools are accountable for upholding these rights (Mbua, 2023; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Suleymanov, 2015). Such policies signal institutional commitment to inclusion and provide guidance for school leaders, staff, and stakeholders.

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) represent a second theme and are central to managing supports in a way that ensures students do not feel “separate or different.” IEPs help align teaching objectives with each learner’s goals, strengths, and challenges, while promoting equitable participation in classroom activities (Lindner & Schwab, 2025; Florian, 2014). Research indicates that well-implemented IEPs enhance both academic and social outcomes, allowing students to experience inclusion as meaningful engagement rather than token participation (Isyatirradhiyah et al., 2025; Kilanowski-Press, Foote, & Rinaldo, 2010).

The third theme, staffing and personnel, highlights the importance of collaborative teaching models and professional readiness. Team-teaching, co-planning, and the integration of support personnel—including special educators, therapists, and teaching assistants—allow schools to respond effectively to diverse learning needs (Alila, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016; Spasovski, 2010; Florian & Rouse, 2009). Leadership practices and ongoing professional development further enable teachers to implement inclusive strategies confidently and competently (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Lambe & Bones, 2006).

Curriculum and teaching strategies form a fourth theme, focusing on differentiation and individualization. Teachers are encouraged to employ varied instructional approaches, flexible assessments, and multimodal learning materials to cater to differences in ability, learning style, and pace (Lindner & Schwab, 2025; Florian, 2008; Ardenlid, Lundqvist, & Sund, 2025). The literature underscores that inclusive pedagogy is proactive, integrating adjustments into everyday teaching rather than treating accommodations as reactive or temporary measures (Smucker, 2024; Akintayo et al., 2024).

A fifth theme concerns external links and partnerships with professional and community support services, such as psychological services, special education councils, and local resource agencies (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Isyatirradhiyah et al., 2025). These collaborations provide additional expertise, diagnostic support, and interventions that enhance the school’s capacity to address complex learning needs, bridging gaps between policy intent and classroom realities (Moriña, 2019; Kaur et al., 2016).

Evidence also points to the importance of inclusive classroom culture, which goes beyond policies and structures to shape day-to-day interactions and learning experiences. Creating a climate of respect, collaboration, and belonging fosters peer support, reduces stigma, and encourages active engagement from all students (Florian, 2014; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025; Mbua, 2023). Teachers play a critical role in modeling inclusive values, facilitating cooperative learning, and promoting social-emotional development alongside academic instruction.

Finally, implementing these practical themes effectively requires alignment with leadership, supervision, and evidence-based practices. Principals, coordinators, and instructional leaders must guide schools in reflective planning, monitoring outcomes, and adapting practices based on evidence (Alila et al., 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Florian, 2014). When systemic support, teacher competence, and inclusive strategies converge, schools can translate inclusion from an aspirational principle into consistent, meaningful practice (Lindner & Schwab, 2025; Florian & Spratt, 2013).

The findings emphasize that practical implementation of inclusive education is multi-dimensional, combining policy frameworks, individualized planning, professional capacity, adaptive pedagogy, collaborative networks, and a positive classroom culture. Together, these themes provide a roadmap for schools to bridge the “implementation gap” and ensure that all learners can participate fully, achieve learning outcomes, and develop a sense of belonging (Kaur et al., 2016; Smucker, 2024; Isyatirradhiyah et al., 2025).

## **Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education**

Despite the clear principles and practical strategies identified for inclusive education, a range of persistent barriers continues to impede full implementation in classrooms worldwide. These challenges operate at multiple levels, including individual attitudes, systemic structures, and resource allocation, collectively contributing to the so-called “implementation gap” between policy ideals and educational practice (Suleymanov, 2015; Smucker, 2024).

One of the most significant barriers is attitudes toward inclusion. Negative perceptions and fears regarding students with disabilities, diversity, or differing learning needs remain prevalent among educators, administrators, and even peers (Lyra, Koullapi, & Kalogeropoulou, 2023; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012). These attitudes can manifest as low expectations, reluctance to adapt teaching methods, or resistance to collaborative practices. Teacher education programs and professional development initiatives play a crucial role in reshaping these perceptions and promoting confidence in inclusive teaching (Florian & Rouse, 2009; Lambe & Bones, 2006).

Rigid curricula represent another major challenge. Traditional education systems often prioritize standardized content and assessments, which limit flexibility in accommodating diverse learning styles and abilities (Smucker, 2024; Akintayo et al., 2024). Without adaptive curriculum design, students who require differentiated instruction may be excluded from meaningful participation, undermining the principle that inclusion should support presence, engagement, and achievement for all learners (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025; Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

Funding and resource allocation further shape the implementation of inclusion. Many educational systems remain financially tied to segregated models or inadequately fund initiatives that support differentiated teaching, classroom assistants, or specialized services (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Spasovski, 2010). Limited budgets constrain access to training, instructional materials, and external collaborations, reducing schools’ capacity to operationalize inclusive policies effectively (Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020; Croft & Brown, 2020).

Teacher preparedness also contributes to the gap. Research shows that many educators feel underprepared to implement inclusive practices effectively, particularly when instructional approaches remain teacher-centered or when professional guidance is lacking (Mpho, 2018; Sharma et al., 2012). The absence of ongoing supervision, mentoring, and reflective practice can hinder the translation of policy into classroom action (Alila, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016).

Social and cultural factors intersect with these barriers, as stigmas, societal expectations, and low community awareness can reinforce exclusionary practices. Studies across Europe, South America, and Africa illustrate that teacher fears, parental resistance, and peer attitudes can undermine inclusion, even in schools with supportive policies and resources (Lyra et al., 2023; Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Addressing these factors requires broader engagement, advocacy, and awareness-raising beyond the classroom.

The barriers to implementing inclusive education are multifaceted and interrelated, encompassing attitudes, rigid curricula, funding constraints, teacher preparedness, and socio-cultural influences. Overcoming these challenges requires systemic reforms, leadership support, and evidence-based professional development that collectively create conditions for meaningful inclusion (Suleymanov, 2015; Smucker, 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2020). By addressing these barriers holistically, schools can bridge the implementation gap and translate inclusive principles into consistent, effective classroom practices.

### **Teacher Education and the Whole-School Solution**

Effective inclusive education relies heavily on teacher preparedness, as educators are the primary agents translating policy into classroom practice. Inclusive systems demand new pedagogical skills, reflective practice, and the ability to differentiate instruction for diverse learners (Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012; Lyra, Koullapi, & Kalogeropoulou, 2023).

Research indicates that many pre-service teachers enter the classroom with limited exposure to inclusive strategies, resulting in low confidence and apprehension when teaching students with diverse needs (Lambe & Bones, 2006; Mpho, 2018). Addressing this gap requires revisiting teacher education curricula to embed inclusive pedagogy, practical experience, and evidence-based strategies (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Teacher efficacy is also shaped by ongoing professional development, mentorship, and collaborative learning opportunities within schools. Studies from Finland and other international contexts suggest that teachers are more likely to implement inclusive practices effectively when they engage in structured collaboration, peer observation, and reflective discussion with colleagues (Paju, Kajamaa, Pirttimaa, & Kontu, 2022; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Additionally, continuous access to research-based strategies and adaptable curricular resources strengthens educators' capacity to meet the diverse needs of all students (Miller et al., 2025; Akintayo et al., 2024).

The whole-school approach underscores that inclusion cannot function as a peripheral initiative; it must be embedded within the school's mission, culture, and daily operations. A holistic model requires alignment of school policies, leadership practices, and pedagogical approaches to create an environment where all learners feel valued and supported (Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006; Ainscow, 2005). Tools such as the Index for Inclusion provide schools with practical frameworks to conduct self-evaluation, identify barriers, and develop internal resources that promote equity (Croft & Brown, 2020; Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020).

Curriculum design is a central component of the whole-school solution, as it bridges policy and practice. Inclusive curriculum development emphasizes flexible, differentiated, and evidence-based approaches that accommodate a range of abilities, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025; Akintayo et al., 2024; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). By integrating universal design principles and adaptable instructional strategies, schools can ensure that learning opportunities are accessible and meaningful for all students, including those traditionally marginalized or underrepresented.

Leadership and school culture further determine the success of inclusion. Principals and coordinators play a key role in fostering collaboration, providing professional support, and modeling inclusive values (DeMatthews, Billingsley, McLeskey, & Sharma, 2020; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). A leadership approach that prioritizes equity, teacher empowerment, and community engagement strengthens the systemic conditions necessary for sustainable inclusion (Ainscow, 2005; Alexiadou & Essex, 2016). Inclusive practices are most effective when teachers, administrators, and support staff share responsibility and accountability for student participation and achievement.

Finally, sustainable inclusive education depends on the integration of teacher competence, curriculum adaptation, leadership support, and school-wide culture. When these elements converge, inclusion becomes embedded in everyday practice rather than a temporary or peripheral initiative (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025). A whole-school perspective ensures that all students experience a sense of belonging, equitable learning opportunities, and meaningful achievement, thereby closing the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Akintayo et al., 2024; Croft & Brown, 2020).

## **Conclusion:**

The "Implementation Gap" in inclusive education is not a reflection of the inadequacy of the principle itself, but rather a consequence of insufficient systemic transformation. While international mandates such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) have established inclusion as a normative expectation, translating these high-level policies into consistent classroom practice remains challenging. Evidence indicates that the gap persists because systemic structures curricula, teacher education, school leadership, and resource allocation have not fully adapted to accommodate the complexity of inclusive education (Suleymanov, 2015; Smucker, 2024).

Addressing this gap requires a paradigm shift from focusing primarily on inputs, such as classroom placement, specialized resources, or infrastructure, toward prioritizing the experiences and learning outcomes of all students. Inclusion is effective not simply when students are physically present in mainstream classrooms, but when they meaningfully participate, achieve academic and social growth, and feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, policy and practice must be aligned to support both the procedural and qualitative dimensions of inclusion (Akintayo et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025).

The literature consistently highlights that systemic transformation involves a multi-layered approach. Teacher education must equip educators with inclusive pedagogical skills, reflective practice, and confidence to differentiate

instruction effectively (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012). School leadership plays a critical role in fostering a collaborative culture, embedding inclusive values in the mission and philosophy of the school, and providing ongoing professional development and support structures (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Paju, Kajamaa, Pirttimaa, & Kontu, 2022). Curricula and instructional practices must be flexible and evidence-based, catering to diverse learning styles and abilities, while external services and support networks reinforce classroom strategies (Akintayo et al., 2024; Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

When schools adopt a holistic, whole-school approach—linking mainstream classrooms, specialized supports, and external resources—they create a dynamic and interconnected system in which inclusion is embedded rather than added as an afterthought. This model fosters a learning environment where all students can meaningfully participate, achieve, and experience a sense of belonging, effectively narrowing the implementation gap.

Thus, successful inclusive education requires ongoing reflection, collaboration, and systemic commitment. Bridging the gap between policy and practice is a continuous process that demands alignment of teacher preparation, school leadership, curriculum design, and community support. International evidence demonstrates that when these elements converge, schools can transform from merely inclusive in principle to inclusive in practice, ensuring that every student “fits in” and thrives academically, socially, and emotionally (Croft & Brown, 2020; Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020).

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