



Beyond Borders and Labels: An Intersectional Review of Special Education Placement Trends

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Susan C. Adona, PhD

Erenas Elementary School

Brgy. Erenas Victoria Northern Samar Philippines

susan.castillano@deped.gov.ph

Flor Junema C. Mabutin, PhD

Ruidoso High School, USA

fjunema@gmail.com

Francesca Micaela C. Masiglat, LPT, MAEd

95th St. Elementary School, USA

fmcmasiglat@gmail.com

Marie Chris Catherine D. Balute, MAEd

Carmel Middle School NC, USA

marieman.08@gmail.com

Maria Avegail M. Padua, PhD

White Mountain Elementary School, NM, USA

avemarigail@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study presents a critical systematic review of international special education placement trends using an intersectional analytical lens. The review synthesizes global literature published between 2015 and 2026 to examine how the intersections of disability, race, language, and socioeconomic status shape the likelihood of students being placed in segregated versus inclusive educational settings. Guided by the PSALSAR systematic review framework, the study analyzed 64 sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy analyses, and international education reports. Findings reveal a persistent contradiction in global education systems: while international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement have promoted inclusive schooling as a global norm, placement outcomes remain stratified across intersecting identities. Students who occupy multiple marginalized positions—particularly those in the Global South or minoritized populations within the Global North—continue to experience disproportionately higher rates of restrictive educational placements. These patterns highlight how ostensibly neutral policies often obscure structural inequities embedded within educational systems. The study therefore argues for a shift away from identity-evasive policy frameworks toward a multi-level architecture of inclusive reform. Such an approach integrates macro-level legal structures, meso-level institutional practices, and micro-level student voice to address the systemic forces that shape placement decisions and to promote more equitable inclusive education practices worldwide.

Keywords: inclusive education, special education placement, intersectionality, disability studies,

Introduction:

The global landscape of special education is currently at a crossroads, caught between the idealized rhetoric of international conventions and the persistent reality of systemic marginalization. While global frameworks increasingly advocate for "Education for All," the practical implementation of inclusive education remains fraught with deep-seated inequities that transcend national boundaries.



This study employs a critical systematic literature review to examine special education placement—defined as the physical and instructional location where a student receives services—not merely as a logistical decision, but as a contested site of power and identity construction. By interrogating the "paradox of dis/ability rights" within a schooled society, we seek to move toward an intersectional discursive, material, and emotive approach to understanding why certain students are consistently moved to the margins (Voulgarides, Etscheidt, & Hernández-Saca, 2024).

We utilize the term "dis/Abilities" to signal that disability is not merely a static medical diagnosis but a social, political, and historical construction. This conceptualization is essential when considering how dis/ability research in education must engage with intersectionality to uncover the multidimensional construction of lived experiences (Hernández-Saca, Gutmann Kahn, & Cannon, 2018). Current global crises, including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-driven migration, have exacerbated these constructions, placing historically marginalized students in increasingly precarious positions.

As we analyze the future of inclusive education, it is clear that we must adopt intersectional perspectives to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing global educational environment (Migliarini & Elder, 2024). Central to this review is the interrogation of how macro-level laws, such as international policies and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), interact with meso-level school organizational practices and micro-level individual lived experiences. Research suggests that structural inequities are often baked into the very fabric of special education law, where the intersection of race and wealth dictates the quality and location of a student's education (Marsico, 2021). By reframing these issues, we move away from viewing disproportionality as a series of technical errors and instead recognize it as a manifestation of systemic inequities that require a fundamental shift in educational leadership and policy (Kramarczuk Voulgarides, Fergus, & King Thorius, 2017; Agosto & Roland, 2018).

A critical dimension of this study involves the "multi-level architecture" of placement, particularly for multilingual learners who navigate the intersection of language acquisition and disability labels. Recent evidence highlights significant ethnic and linguistic disparities in the special education pipeline, beginning as early as birth through age five (Cycyk et al., 2022). Furthermore, national trends indicate that English learners with disabilities often face distinct academic outcomes and placement patterns that differ significantly from their peers, necessitating a mixed-methods approach to contextualize why these disproportionalities persist in specific local ecologies (Cooc, 2023; Cuba & Tefera, 2024).

The influence of geography and local context cannot be overstated in the study of racial disproportionality. Research across multiple states has demonstrated that racial differences in special education identification and placement are not uniform but are deeply influenced by regional demographics and school-level cultures (Grindal et al., 2019). This necessitates a critical disability education policy approach that accounts for how and why context matters, ensuring that "inclusive" settings do not become sites of "internal exclusion" where students are physically present but instructionally isolated (Tefera & Fischman, 2020; Bešić, 2020).

Furthermore, this review acknowledges the necessity of transnational education policy research to understand how intersectionality operates across different cultural and political borders (Robert & Yu, 2018). For instance, within fields like critical autism studies, an intersectional lens reveals how various social identities—such as race, gender, and class—shape the diagnosis and support pathways for neurodivergent individuals globally (Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022). To truly support multilingual learners with exceptionalities, educators must adopt collaborative roles and evidence-based strategies that respect the intersectional nature of language learning and inclusion (Rad, 2025).

This study advocates for a "writing for our lives" approach, drawing on Black feminisms and interconnected guidance to challenge the traditional, often clinical, qualitative research methods in special education (Boveda & McCray, 2021). By centering the voices of those at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities, we aim to disrupt the endogeneity of special education law and promote a version of inclusion that is truly "identity-responsive." Through this review, we argue that moving "beyond borders and labels" requires a global commitment to dismantling the emotive and material structures that continue to segregate students based on the perceived value of their identities.

Literature Review:



The global landscape of special education is currently at a crossroads, navigating the tension between the idealized rhetoric of international conventions and the persistent reality of systemic marginalization. While global frameworks increasingly advocate for "Education for All," the practical implementation of inclusive education remains fraught with deep-seated inequities that transcend national boundaries.

This review examines special education placement—the physical and instructional location where a student receives services—not merely as a logistical decision, but as a contested site of power and identity construction. By interrogating the "paradox of dis/ability rights" within a schooled society, we move toward an intersectional discursive, material, and emotive approach to understanding why certain students are consistently relegated to the margins (Voulgarides, Etscheidt, & Hernández-Saca, 2024; Francisco, Hartman, & Wang, 2020).

Central to this examination is the concept of intersectionality as a critical pathway toward genuine inclusive education. Dis/ability research must engage with intersectionality to uncover the multidimensional construction of lived experiences, recognizing that disability is not a static medical diagnosis but a social and political construction (Bešić, 2020; Hernández-Saca, Gutmann Kahn, & Cannon, 2018). This perspective is vital when analyzing the "future of inclusive education," which demands a move away from "identity-evasive" policies toward those that honor the complex social identities of students (Migliarini & Elder, 2024). Without this shift, educational leadership remains ill-equipped to address the systemic barriers that prevent equitable access to the general education curriculum (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Boveda, Reyes, & Aronson, 2019).

Structural inequities are often embedded within the legal frameworks governing special education, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The nexus of race, wealth, and disability significantly influences a student's trajectory, often resulting in the over-identification of marginalized groups in more restrictive settings (Marsico, 2021; White et al., 2019). Research across various states confirms that racial differences in identification and placement are not accidental but are tied to the "nexus of race, ability, and place" (Grindal et al., 2019). This necessitates a reframing of disproportionality from a technical error to a systemic outcome of historical and sociocultural forces (Kramarczuk Voulgarides, Fergus, & King Thorius, 2017; Tefera et al., 2023).

The "pipeline" to special education often begins well before a child enters primary school, with ethnic and linguistic disparities appearing as early as birth through age five (Cycyk et al., 2022). For multilingual learners, the intersection of language acquisition and disability labels creates a unique set of challenges that can lead to either over- or under-representation in special education services. By utilizing an "ever-English learner" framework, researchers can better track these national trends and understand how academic outcomes are shaped by the dual pressures of language learning and disability identification (Umansky, Thompson, & Díaz, 2017; Cooc, 2023).

Contextual factors, such as the racial composition and segregation levels of a school, play a decisive role in how students are "sorted" into special education. Studies indicate that school segregation and the racial makeup of the student body are strong predictors of racial gaps in identification, suggesting that the environment often dictates the diagnosis (Elder et al., 2021; Fish, 2019). This "critical disability education policy approach" emphasizes that context is not just a background variable but a fundamental driver of how disproportionality manifests and persists (Tefera & Fischman, 2020). Longitudinal studies have shown that ethnic disproportionality in high-incidence categories remains a stubborn fixture of national education systems (Strand & Lindorff, 2021).

The specific needs of dual language learners (DLLs) further highlight the gap between policy and practitioner readiness. Many special education teachers report a lack of preparedness to work with DLLs, signaling a need to re-center social justice within teacher training and professional development (Gonzalez, Okhremtchouk, & Esposito, 2021). To effectively support multilingual learners with exceptionalities, school systems must adopt collaborative, evidence-based strategies that address the intersectionality of language and inclusion (Rad, 2025). Furthermore, in an era of anti-immigration policy, inclusive education must actively enact equity for disabled English language learners who face heightened vulnerability (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021).

The role of school choice and market-based reforms, such as charter schools, adds another layer of complexity to the equity debate. While some argue that alternative school models could address racial inequities in access to general



education classrooms, longitudinal data often reveals that equity gaps persist regardless of school type (Waitoller & Maggin, 2020; Pak & Parsons, 2020).

Socioeconomic status also intersects with special educational needs, where school choice is often influenced by social class, further entrenching identities based on economic privilege or lack thereof (Cahill, 2024). Intersectional perspectives are also gaining ground in specialized fields such as critical autism studies, where a narrative review of the literature shows how race, gender, and class shape the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals (Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022).

Despite this growing awareness, a 16-year review of participant diversity in intervention research suggests that special education journals still struggle to represent the full spectrum of student identities (Sinclair et al., 2018). This lack of representation extends to transnational education policy research, which must do more to account for how intersectionality operates across different geopolitical borders (Robert & Yu, 2018; Aikens, McKenzie, & Vaughter, 2018).

Moving "Beyond Borders and Labels" requires a radical shift in how researchers and practitioners approach special education. This involves a "writing for our lives" ethos that centers Black feminisms and qualitative methods to challenge traditional, often ableist, research paradigms (Boveda & McCray, 2021). By dismantling the "affective, discursive, emotive, and material" structures that maintain segregation, the global education community can begin to bridge the gap between inclusive ideology and equitable practice. Only through a sustained, intersectional critique of placement trends can we hope to achieve a truly inclusive future for all students.

Methodology:

This study adheres to the PSALSAR framework—comprising Protocol, Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, Analysis, and Reporting—to ensure a rigorous and transparent methodological process in examining global special education placement. The search strategy involved a systematic exploration of major academic databases, including Google Scholar and OneSearch, utilizing targeted keywords such as "Intersectionality," "Special Education Placement," "Global Inclusive Education," and "DisCrit."

To ensure the inclusion of the most contemporary empirical and theoretical advancements, the review timeframe was strictly limited to literature published between 2010 and 2023. This comprehensive search yielded a diverse corpus of 49 primary sources, which underwent a meticulous appraisal process to confirm their relevance to intersectional placement trends. The final selection included 30 peer-reviewed articles, 10 dissertations, 5 book chapters, and 4 high-level research reports, providing a multi-perspectival foundation for the subsequent analysis.

The analytical phase of this research is grounded in the principle of theoretical pluralism, integrating several critical frameworks to interpret the complex data on student placement. Central to this approach is Disability Studies in Education (DSE), which is employed to dismantle traditional, medicalized paradigms that view students through a lens of deficit or a need to be "fixed." By shifting the focus from individual impairment to social and institutional barriers, DSE allows for a more nuanced understanding of how inclusive environments are constructed. This is further enriched by the application of Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit), which provides the necessary tools to examine the interdependence of racism and ableism, specifically highlighting how these forces converge to marginalize students of color within special education systems.

The study incorporates the concept of Emotion-Aware Policy Prolepsis to address the often-overlooked affective dimensions of educational legislation. This framework serves as a vital bridge between the technical, often cold language of international inclusive education law and the lived, emotive experiences of the students and families who navigate these placements. By analyzing the "proleptic" nature of policy—how it anticipates and shapes future educational identities—the study investigates how legal mandates are emotionally interpreted and enacted at the local level. This pluralistic theoretical lens ensures that the synthesis of the 49 included sources moves beyond a mere summary of trends, instead offering a deep, critical interrogation of the power dynamics and human realities inherent in special education placement.



Findings and Discussion:

3.1. Intersectional Placement Trends

Scholars examining global special education placement frequently draw on ecological perspectives such as Bronfenbrenner's human development theory to conceptualize how students interact with multiple environmental systems that influence educational outcomes. Within this ecological framework, placement decisions are not neutral administrative processes but are embedded within broader social, cultural, and institutional dynamics. Across the literature reviewed, a consistent finding is that students positioned at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities—particularly race, language status, and socioeconomic disadvantage—experience disproportionate placement in more restrictive educational settings.

Longitudinal and national studies have repeatedly documented patterns of ethnic disproportionality in special education identification and placement. For example, Strand and Lindorff (2021) found persistent ethnic disparities in the identification of high-incidence special educational needs among students aged five to eleven. Similarly, research on school segregation indicates that the racial composition of schools significantly shapes identification patterns, suggesting that structural inequalities embedded within schooling environments contribute to racial gaps in special education placement (Elder et al., 2021). Studies examining local contexts further highlight the enduring nexus of race, ability, and place, demonstrating how institutional practices within specific districts reinforce historical patterns of marginalization (White et al., 2019).

Within the Global North, the literature frequently critiques the prevalence of “identity-evasive” approaches to inclusion, where policies claim to treat students “equally” while ignoring structural inequities tied to race, language, and migration status. Such approaches often result in practices that are not identity-responsive, thereby overlooking the needs of Black, Indigenous, and Youth of Color (BIYOC) and multilingual learners (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021; Umansky, Thompson, & Díaz, 2017). These dynamics are further complicated by broader social policies such as immigration enforcement, which can intensify the marginalization of disabled English language learners and shape their access to inclusive schooling environments.

In the Global South, placement decisions are often influenced by the transnational diffusion of special education models originating in the Global North. These imported frameworks frequently rely on medicalized understandings of disability that do not fully account for local cultural contexts, community knowledge systems, or educational ecologies (Wolff et al., 2021; Thomas & Loxley, 2022). Consequently, the global circulation of these models can reproduce forms of educational stratification rather than disrupt them.

Socioeconomic inequality also plays a critical role in shaping placement trajectories. Research indicates that social class intersects with disability identification and school choice, often reinforcing educational hierarchies and limiting access to inclusive settings for students from economically marginalized communities (Cahill, 2024; Waitoller & Maggin, 2020). These patterns highlight how placement operates within broader systems of stratification that extend beyond disability categories alone.

The literature further suggests that the field of special education research itself has historically struggled to represent the full diversity of student identities. A review of participant demographics in intervention studies across major special education journals revealed limited representation of racially and linguistically diverse populations, raising concerns about the generalizability of widely cited evidence bases (Sinclair et al., 2018). Similar critiques have emerged in broader intersectional scholarship, which emphasizes the need for research frameworks that explicitly account for overlapping systems of inequality across social identities (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019).

Taken together, these findings suggest that special education placement should be understood as a structurally mediated process shaped by intersecting social identities and institutional arrangements, rather than a purely technical decision based on individual student needs. Emerging scholarship increasingly calls for intersectional, justice-oriented frameworks that interrogate how ableism, racism, and class inequality operate simultaneously within educational systems (Erevelles, Grace, & Parekh, 2019; Thorius, 2019). Such perspectives provide critical insights for reimagining



inclusive education as a systemic transformation rather than a procedural adjustment within existing institutional structures.

Defining Global Inclusion in Placement

The concept of inclusive education within special education placement remains contested across international scholarship. Definitions range from narrow interpretations—such as ensuring physical access to schooling or improving employment outcomes—to broader human-rights-based frameworks that emphasize dignity, participation, and equity.

Contemporary international discourse increasingly frames inclusion as a systemic transformation rather than simply a matter of integrating students with disabilities into existing educational structures (Cerna et al., 2021; Aiston & Walraven, 2024). Within this paradigm, placement decisions are understood as embedded within social, institutional, and political systems that shape how educational opportunities are distributed across diverse student populations.

Aspirational definitions of inclusion frequently draw upon global human rights frameworks that articulate the moral and legal basis for equitable education. Foundational documents such as the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are widely cited as benchmarks for inclusive placement practices, emphasizing that students with disabilities should be educated within general education environments whenever possible. These frameworks have significantly influenced national policy agendas and research discourses, positioning inclusive education as a core component of democratic and socially just schooling systems (Cerna et al., 2021; Wolff et al., 2021).

Despite these aspirational frameworks, the literature reveals a persistent gap between the ideological commitments of inclusion and their practical implementation. Scholars frequently critique what has been described as “technical compliance,” wherein educational systems adhere to the formal requirements of inclusive policies without addressing the deeper structural inequalities that shape student placement. In such contexts, schools may comply with legal mandates while maintaining institutional practices that reproduce segregation or marginalization (Thomas & Loxley, 2022; Parekh & Brown, 2019). Consequently, inclusion often becomes a symbolic policy commitment rather than a transformative practice within everyday schooling.

This tension between aspiration and implementation is also reflected in the broader policy language surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). A growing body of scholarship suggests that these frameworks can become diluted when translated into policy rhetoric without clear operational definitions or accountability mechanisms. Reviews of EDI policy frameworks demonstrate that while inclusive language is increasingly common, its interpretation varies widely across educational contexts, leading to inconsistent enactment at institutional levels (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023; Aiston & Walraven, 2024).

Another critical dimension in defining inclusive placement involves the epistemological foundations of disability within education. Scholars within disability studies argue that inclusion should not be framed solely as an administrative or policy issue, but as a transformative rethinking of how knowledge, curriculum, and participation are structured within schooling. From this perspective, disability functions as a “meta-curriculum” that challenges normative assumptions about ability, productivity, and learning (Erevelles, Grace, & Parekh, 2019). Such approaches call for systemic changes that extend beyond placement decisions to encompass curriculum design, assessment practices, and school culture.

Research examining educator practices further demonstrates that the enactment of inclusive placement depends heavily on teacher beliefs, professional agency, and institutional support. International reviews highlight that teachers often face tensions between inclusive ideals and the practical constraints of classroom realities, including limited training, insufficient collaboration structures, and resource shortages (Miller et al., 2022; Karamani et al., 2024). These challenges underscore the importance of professional development that equips educators with both the pedagogical tools and critical perspectives necessary to implement inclusive practices effectively.

Intersectional scholarship has also expanded the conceptualization of inclusion by emphasizing how disability intersects with race, gender, language, and socioeconomic status. Studies across diverse academic fields demonstrate



that educational research often fails to adequately represent the experiences of multiply marginalized populations, leading to policy frameworks that overlook critical dimensions of inequality (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Oleson et al., 2022). In special education specifically, scholars have highlighted the historical construction of disability categories as “objects of protection” that simultaneously create enduring boundaries of difference within educational systems (Artiles, Dorn, & Bal, 2016).

Emerging research calls for a more participatory and relational model of inclusive placement that centers the voices of students, families, and communities. Inclusive education cannot be fully realized without meaningful collaboration between educators and families in decision-making processes such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and related planning structures (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Robertson et al., 2017).

When such collaboration is absent, placement decisions risk reinforcing institutional power dynamics that marginalize the perspectives of those most affected. Taken together, the literature suggests that defining global inclusion requires moving beyond policy rhetoric toward a multidimensional framework that integrates human rights, intersectional equity, professional agency, and community participation in shaping educational placement practices.

3.3. The Role of Law and Policy

International law and educational policy play a central role in shaping global conversations about inclusive education and special education placement. International frameworks, including those developed through multilateral institutions, provide normative guidelines that encourage countries to expand access to education for learners with disabilities. These frameworks often emphasize equity, participation, and non-discrimination as foundational principles for inclusive schooling systems (Cerna et al., 2021; Aiston & Walraven, 2024). As a result, international conventions and policy agreements have become powerful reference points for national reforms seeking to align educational systems with global inclusion agendas.

Despite these normative commitments, scholars increasingly emphasize that law should not be viewed simply as a set of neutral rules. Instead, legal systems operate as collections of socially constructed symbols and institutional practices that reflect the priorities of dominant social groups. Historical analyses of special education policy reveal that legal protections for students with disabilities often emerged alongside broader social efforts to categorize and manage difference within educational institutions (Artiles, Dorn, & Bal, 2016). Consequently, legal frameworks designed to protect marginalized students can simultaneously reinforce boundaries between categories of learners.

One explanation for this paradox lies in the endogeneity of law, a concept describing how laws acquire meaning through the social contexts in which they are interpreted and applied. While international conventions promote inclusive education as a guiding principle, local actors—including school administrators, teachers, and policymakers—often reinterpret these frameworks according to existing institutional norms. As a result, policies intended to expand inclusion may be implemented in ways that preserve longstanding patterns of segregation or stratification within schooling systems (Thomas & Loxley, 2022; Parekh & Brown, 2019).

Empirical research on inclusive education policies demonstrates that legal mandates alone rarely produce transformative change without corresponding shifts in professional practice and institutional culture. Studies examining teacher perceptions of inclusion highlight the significant role educators play in translating policy directives into classroom realities. When educators lack adequate training, resources, or institutional support, inclusive policies may remain largely symbolic rather than substantively enacted (Miller et al., 2022; Karamani et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of legal frameworks depends heavily on the capacity of educational systems to support practitioners in implementing inclusive approaches.

The policy landscape is further complicated by the expanding use of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) frameworks in educational governance. While these frameworks aim to address systemic inequities, scholars note that their language can sometimes obscure the structural mechanisms that sustain exclusion. Reviews of EDI policy discourse indicate that institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion frequently coexist with practices that reproduce inequalities in access, representation, and participation (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). As a result, the rhetoric of inclusion may mask persistent disparities in how educational resources and opportunities are distributed.



Research examining specific policy instruments also highlights the uneven application of legal protections across different student populations. For example, studies of disability accommodation systems demonstrate that access to supports such as individualized education plans or related services can vary widely depending on institutional interpretation and resource availability (Lewis & Muñiz, 2023). Similarly, historical and contemporary analyses show that legal classifications of disability intersect with race, socioeconomic status, and other social markers, shaping how students are identified and placed within educational systems (Parekh, Brown, & Robson, 2018).

Intersectional scholarship further reveals that legal and policy frameworks often fail to fully account for the complexity of overlapping forms of marginalization experienced by students with disabilities. Research across multiple disciplines highlights how race, gender, economic status, and geographic location interact with disability status to shape educational opportunities and outcomes (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Singleton et al., 2020; Munir et al., 2022). Without explicit attention to these intersecting dimensions, policies designed to promote inclusion may inadvertently reproduce the inequalities they seek to address.

Recent scholarship calls for a more participatory and critically informed approach to policy implementation that centers the voices of students, families, and communities. Inclusive legal frameworks are most effective when they are accompanied by collaborative decision-making processes, professional learning opportunities, and community engagement structures that support equitable participation in educational planning (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Robertson et al., 2017). Such approaches recognize that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved solely through legal mandates but requires ongoing dialogue between policy frameworks and the lived experiences of those they are intended to serve.

The Macro-Meso-Micro Architecture

Placement decisions in special and inclusive education rarely occur in isolation; rather, they emerge from a macro–meso–micro architecture that reflects interactions between legal mandates, institutional cultures, and the lived experiences of students. This framework conceptualizes placement as a “dynamic lens” through which global policies intersect with local practices and individual agency. Research on inclusive education systems consistently demonstrates that decisions about where students learn are shaped simultaneously by international frameworks, national legislation, school-level practices, and interpersonal dynamics within classrooms (Cerna et al., 2021; Francisco, Hartman, & Wang, 2020).

At the macro level, placement is guided by legal and policy frameworks that articulate the rights of students with disabilities to access education in inclusive environments. International conventions and national legislation—such as those inspired by the Warnock Report and subsequent policy developments—have established inclusion as a normative goal across many educational systems (Lindsay, Wedell, & Dockrell, 2020).

However, scholars frequently highlight a persistent lack of conceptual clarity within these frameworks, particularly regarding what constitutes a “least restrictive environment.” This ambiguity allows policymakers and institutions to interpret inclusive mandates in varying ways, sometimes resulting in policies that formally endorse inclusion while permitting continued segregation (Thomas & Loxley, 2022; Parekh & Brown, 2019).

The meso level, which encompasses school culture and institutional structures, plays a decisive role in translating policy into practice. Even when inclusive policies exist, schools may lack the professional collaboration, leadership structures, and fiscal resources necessary to move students from segregated settings into general education environments. Studies examining inclusive implementation highlight the importance of collaborative teacher networks, interdisciplinary support teams, and sustained professional learning opportunities (Miller et al., 2022; Karamani et al., 2024). Without these supports, schools may default to established placement routines that prioritize administrative efficiency over inclusive participation.

Institutional contexts also reflect broader social inequalities that influence placement decisions. Research shows that socioeconomic status, race, and linguistic background intersect with disability identification and school placement patterns. For example, studies examining disproportionality in special education demonstrate how English learners and students from economically marginalized communities may be disproportionately represented in segregated programs or alternative educational pathways (Umansky, Thompson, & Díaz, 2017; Waitoller & Maggin, 2020).



Similarly, analyses of school choice and identity formation suggest that social class can shape how families navigate educational placement options and access resources within school systems (Cahill, 2024). At the micro level, the perspectives and experiences of students themselves remain strikingly underrepresented in global discussions of inclusive placement. Much of the literature treats students as objects of policy decisions rather than as active participants in shaping their educational trajectories. This absence reflects broader critiques within disability studies that educational systems often frame learners primarily through diagnostic categories rather than recognizing them as multidimensional individuals with diverse identities and aspirations (Erevelles, Grace, & Parekh, 2019; Tan, Padilla, & Lambert, 2022).

Emerging intersectional scholarship further highlights how students' lived experiences cannot be understood solely through disability labels. Instead, disability intersects with gender, race, class, and other social identities in ways that shape access to educational opportunities and participation in decision-making processes. Studies examining family engagement, information-seeking behavior, and social determinants of well-being illustrate how these intersecting factors influence how students and families navigate educational systems and advocate for appropriate placements (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019; Edyburn et al., 2023; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020).

The macro-meso-micro framework underscores the need to center student voice and participatory decision-making in inclusive education policy and practice. Scholars increasingly argue that meaningful inclusion requires moving beyond technocratic placement procedures toward collaborative planning processes that involve students, families, and educators as partners. Formal mechanisms such as inclusive planning meetings and individualized education plans can provide opportunities for such engagement when implemented thoughtfully (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Robertson et al., 2017). Recognizing students as active agents within the placement process is therefore essential to transforming inclusive education from a policy aspiration into a lived educational reality.

Conclusion:

The international trajectory of special education placement reveals a persistent paradox. Over the past several decades, global education systems have adopted increasingly progressive legal frameworks promoting inclusion, yet actual placement practices remain deeply stratified along lines of disability, race, socioeconomic status, language, and other intersecting identities. International commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and earlier policy frameworks like the UNESCO Salamanca Statement have positioned inclusive education as a global norm. However, empirical research continues to demonstrate disparities in who gains access to general education classrooms and who remains segregated in specialized settings. These inequities are often shaped by systemic factors including institutional bias, unequal school resources, and historical patterns of educational stratification. Scholars consistently argue that inclusive policies alone are insufficient if they are implemented within systems that continue to reproduce broader social inequalities.

One critical recommendation emerging from contemporary scholarship is a shift toward disability justice frameworks. Rather than focusing solely on technical compliance with policy mandates, education systems must confront the structural forces that sustain exclusion, including ableism and racialized assumptions embedded within institutional practices. Disability justice perspectives emphasize the interconnected nature of oppression and call for reforms that recognize disability within broader social and political contexts.

This approach reframes inclusion as a matter of human rights, dignity, and social transformation rather than a procedural obligation. By acknowledging how disability intersects with race, class, gender, and language, policymakers and educators can begin to dismantle the underlying hierarchies that shape placement decisions and educational opportunity. Another essential component of transformative reform is the centering of student voice. Historically, students with disabilities have been treated as passive recipients of educational placement decisions rather than active participants in shaping their learning environments.

Contemporary research increasingly highlights the importance of honoring students' perspectives, experiences, and identities in the design of inclusive practices. When students are recognized as multidimensional individuals with intersecting social identities, educational decision-making becomes more responsive and humane. Centering student



voice also challenges deficit-oriented narratives and creates opportunities for collaborative educational planning that reflects students' aspirations, cultural contexts, and lived experiences.

Meaningful progress toward inclusive education requires sustained systemic reform. Governments and educational authorities must provide the fiscal resources, professional development, and institutional support necessary to translate inclusive ideology into daily practice. Without investments in teacher training, collaborative professional cultures, and accessible learning infrastructures, inclusive policies remain largely symbolic.

Achieving the vision of "Beyond Borders and Labels" therefore demands recognition that inclusive education is not simply about where students are placed but about how educational cultures are enacted. Inclusion must be understood as an ongoing cultural negotiation of values, rules, and symbols within schools, one that continually strives to ensure equity, participation, and dignity for all learners.

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