

# Unearthing Themes in ‘inclusive education’ Discourse to Inform Sustainable Development Agenda on Education: A Systematic Literature Review Approach

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**Abstract** The paper unveils themes in inclusive education discourse foregrounded in educational philosophy to inform the Sustainable Development agenda on education. The study adopts a systematic literature review search using multiple databases targeted at secondary data published within 10 years (2012 - 2022). Emergent from these study findings are themes among which include: Respect for cultural identities, inclusive leadership, curriculum for all, inclusive classroom culture and collaborative professional learning and practice. Given the current stance taken by the international community to adopt and adapt the concept of inclusive education as the leading voice within the education sector as demonstrated through Sustainable development goal number 4 whose thrust is to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ by 2030. Thus, if this goal is to be attained by 2030, there is urgent need to fully embrace inclusive education from the social model point of view whose emphasis is on situating the challenges of exclusion within the environment. This is a sure precursor to ensuring that no child is left behind since every child matters equally.

**Keywords:** *inclusive education, sustainable development goals, educational philosophy, policy, practice*

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, major themes are unearthed from inclusive education discourse. Studies are generated from Australia, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Malaysia, Norway, Oman, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Wales and Zambia among others. It is from the selected studies documented that major themes are generated and synthesized into word displays to elicit further debate. The emergent themes generated are grounded in philosophy of education as seen through Essentialism (essence), Perennialism (continuous), Progressivism (open-mindedness), Social Reconstructionism (emancipation), Existentialism (human existence), Behaviorism (behaviour), Constructivism (active learners), and Conservatism (social stability) [1] and [2]. Finally, implications are drawn to inform policy and practice.

## 2. Background

According to [3], 99 percent of boys and girls were enrolled in primary education from more developed countries compared to 83 percent of pupils in less developed countries in 2020 worldwide [3]. Given the

statistics above, it can be argued that there has been enormous progress in achieving the target of universal primary education.

Key among the reasons accounting for a lower enrollment in developing countries compared to developed are linked to high levels of poverty, armed conflicts and other emergencies. Children from the poorest households are up to four times more likely to be out of school than those of the richest households. Disparities between rural and urban areas also remain high [4] and [5]. It should be noted that the closer one gets to achieving 100% target, the harder it becomes especially with the complexity inherent in inclusive education [6].

Achieving inclusive and quality education for all reaffirms the belief that education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development. This goal ensures that all girls and boys complete free primary and secondary schooling by 2030. It also aims to provide equal access to affordable vocational training, to eliminate gender and wealth disparities, and achieve universal access to a quality higher education [6].

### 2.1. Differences between Inclusive Education & Integration

[7] defines inclusion education as a ‘continuous process of increasing presence, participation and achievement of

all children and young people in their local schools'. On the other hand, integration views children with special education needs as having problem which require 'fixing' by experts with specialised instruments and techniques. On the contrary, Inclusive Education views mainstream education systems as full of barriers that require removing so that all children can access, participate and achieve their aspirations in life [8].

## 2.2. "Power over" versus "Power with"

The difference between Integration and Inclusive Education is to a larger extent, in the way each of the two concepts addresses the issue of 'power factor' [9]. Under Integration, experts such as psychologists, special teacher, doctors, and physiotherapists are considered to have more power over their clients by society. For example, experts prescribe what their clients should do. In the education system, this dominance over clients is shown through the way experts continue to prescribe how children with SEN are supposed to be educated. Experts do so by screening, assessments, placements and prescribing the curriculum contents children with SEN are supposed to be given. This dominance over others could as well account for the continued segregation and discrimination of the marginalised persons in society.

Unlike Integration, under Inclusive Education emphasis is on 'power with' and not 'power over' others [9]. The understanding here is that people have equal rights. For instance, equality is seen in schools through equal participation by all stakeholders in the school improvement process. Each and every person, that is to say teachers, pupils, parents and other school staff are expected to participate in the improvement of their school. 'Pupil voice' is highly regarded as important in the school development process. Inclusionists argue that this is the best way of ending segregation and discrimination experienced by the marginalised in society [10].

## 2.3. The Child as Problem versus the Education System as Problem

In trying to transform the education system, inclusive education focuses on barriers to learning experienced by all children especially the marginalised ones, such as negative attitudes to diversity, rigid curriculum, limited school places and inaccessible infrastructure. On the contrary, Integration focuses on 'transforming the children with SEN' by using specialised screening, assessment, placement and teaching tools. The intention of 'transforming the child' is to facilitate for his or her being 'fitted in' a rigid curriculum and inaccessible infrastructure [10].

## 2.4. Procedures for the Literature Review

This study was delimited to the following databases accessible to the researcher, namely, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Directory of Open Access Resources (OpenDOAR); Education Index, JSTOR, SAGE Online Journals, Emerald Management, University of Chicago Journals, Google search engine,

Palgrave Macmillan Journals, Wiley Library, among others. The process for literature search lasted for 2 months.

The literature review search in each of the listed databases above was conducted using key terms drawn from the topic, first searched using Boolean Operators: AND and " " as single entities and then in combination with other entities. The literature search was limited to journals published in the past 10 years, out of which 80% of the literature identified and used, had been published in the past 10 years (2012–2022). After an initial literature search across various databases, specific articles were purposively sampled based on their relevance and relatedness to the study at hand. The sampled journals were then studied in detail using an in-depth literature search guide. Consequently, the literature search yielded 20 studies related to the research theme at hand.

## 3. Literature Review

[11] conducted a study on 'Mapping research on inclusive education since Salamanca Statement: A bibliometric review of the literature over 25 years.' The purpose of this study was to map the research literature on inclusive education (IE) since the Salamanca Statement using metadata extracted from 7,084 Scopus-indexed publications over the last 25 years in terms of the growth trajectory, productivity, collaborative networks, and intellectual structure of the field. Key findings of the study were: (i) the academic interest on IE had risen from the Salamanca Statement to date; (ii) IE research was a global phenomenon, although the bulk of research was still published by a small number of authors and countries; (iii) there was a noteworthy level of scientific collaboration in the field, with numerous consolidated research groups and robust research collaborations between countries; (iv) four schools of thought defined the intellectual structure of IE research: system and structures, special education, accessibility and participation, and critical research; (v) four general themes were addressed in the literature over the last 25 years: IE in higher education settings, pre-service teacher education and their attitudes towards IE, teaching for inclusion and in-service professional development on IE, and practices and principles of IE [11].

[12] in his study dubbed 'is inclusive education really for everyone? Family stories of children and young people labelled with 'severe and multiple' or 'profound' 'disabilities' delved on Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, along with General Comment 4. The study findings explicitly outlined the right of every person to an inclusive education at every level. And yet, even amongst supporters of inclusive education, it was not uncommon for some students to be considered 'too disabled' to be included. In his study he drew on the views and lived experiences of 10 parents, living in Australia, who identified their children as having been labelled with 'severe and multiple' or 'profound' impairments. He reflected on what inclusion meant to parents and their families, and whether inclusion and inclusive education was important to them. Drawing on parent perspectives, was the notion of inclusive education for everyone realistic and desirable, or only idealistic? Should inclusion be inclusive or is it ultimately

conditional? The perspectives of the research participants had implications for the realisation of the right to inclusive education [12].

[13] postulate that the argument for the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, championed by Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, has largely been accepted nationally and internationally by policy makers, and is increasingly being accepted by teachers. In interrogating the complex craft of developing inclusive and equal learning environments for children with disabilities, their article draws upon Kershner's 'core aspects of teachers' knowledge and knowing', and in particular, 'the school as a site for the development of teaching expertise and the creation of knowledge'. Data was generated from in-depth interviews following videoed lesson observations with experienced teachers in 15 rural, urban and coastal primary schools in four districts in Tanzania. Emergent findings indicated that the teachers' practice was moving unevenly towards disability equality, and involved processes of inclusions and exclusions. This involved teacher autonomy, agency and reflective practice in the context of material, attitudinal, structural, pedagogic and curricular barriers. The teachers' expertise had potential to inform national and international policy developments, and so reduce the evident rhetoric-reality gap. In conclusion, they argued that inclusive education needed to grapple with disability as a social construct, and lessons were generated for the further fulfilment of the rights of children with disabilities to equal participation in education [13].

In their study, [14] focused on answering a question, 'what matters in learning communities for inclusive education?' Their study was a cross-case analysis. Emergent from their study findings were a number of prerequisite for inclusion to take root among which included: (i) requirement of on-going commitment to teachers' professional learning, (ii) development of learning communities, (iii) responsiveness to contextual exigencies, (iv) expertise matters and supportive networks [14].

[15] undertook a study entitled 'inclusive Education in Wales: Interpreting discourses of values and practice using critical policy analysis.' the Purpose of the study was to analyse inclusive education policies in the context of major system reform in Wales, United Kingdom. Wales was undergoing the most significant changes to its education system since political devolution from the U.K. This study explored how inclusion was articulated and communicated within the key policy and guidance documents, using two continuums— "practice" and "values"—to map and interpret documents. The study applied critical policy analysis to make sense of these various inclusive education policy reforms in Wales. Findings revealed that despite a foregrounded commitment to inclusion, there was disparity both within and between the policy and guidance documents. Further, there was lack of coherence of key messages articulated through education policy documentation in Wales, providing insight into the emerging national education system reforms, as well as developing an approach for evaluating inclusive education systems in other jurisdictions [15].

[16] conducted a study on 'teachers talk on student needs: exploring how teacher beliefs challenge inclusive education in a Norwegian context.' This study explored teacher talk in the early phase of a project in a Norwegian elementary school where Lesson Study was used as a method for professional development. The study focused on inclusion and aimed to explore what beliefs about student needs and teacher role and responsibilities become evident, and how these beliefs could challenge development towards a more inclusive practice. To this end, content analysis was applied to audio recordings of teacher teams' planning meetings. Despite an overall positive attitude towards inclusion, and inclusive structures in the school, findings pointed to factors in teachers' beliefs that could challenge the inclusion process. These factors were: student needs understood as individual problems, adaptation understood as individualised and laborious and a limited view on teacher role, where their responsibility mainly regard academic learning [16].

[17] focused on a study 'conceptualising inclusive education in Saudi Arabia through conversations with special education teachers.' It was noted that, in the previous decade, inclusive education (IE) had become a trending topic in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This small-scale, qualitative Saudi study reported on how some teachers viewed inclusive education in their country and whether students with a disability (autism) could be educated in mainstream schools. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded using a smartphone. The analysis of interview data identified three themes related to inclusive education and the concept of mainstream schooling for students with autism. Findings showed that the participants had some knowledge and understanding of inclusive education. However, whether students with autism could be taught by general education teachers in mainstream schools reported mixed results. Some teachers spoke positively about the possibility, while others focused on existing barriers. These included the need for general education teachers to receive specialised training and professional learning in the form of authentic mentoring networks, training in special needs education to link theory with practice and how the scarcity of classroom resources hampers quality educational experiences and outcomes for some students [17].

In a related study, [18] explored Attitudes of teachers in Bulgarian kindergartens towards inclusive education. Findings indicated that, teachers were most likely to hold negative affective attitudes and positive behavioural attitudes towards inclusion. At the same, inclusion-related training significantly predicted positive attitudes towards inclusion across cognitive, behavioural, and affective domains. Thus, their findings accentuate the importance of continuous professional development for teachers already teaching in the system in fostering more positive attitudes towards inclusion [18].

Related to [18] was a study by [19] entitled 'building school capacity for inclusive education in the sultanate of Oman: A construct validation of the inclusive school climate scale. The purpose of their study was to develop and validate the Inclusive School Climate Scale (ISCS) in order to assess how schools in Oman were building capacity for inclusive education successful practices. The

23-item ISCS was developed and administered to 287 teachers from schools in Oman. The findings showed three main factors that reflected the ability of schools to build capacity for inclusive practices and create an inclusive climate for students [19].

[20] in their study attempted to answer the question, 'What Is Inclusive Education?' It was noted that theories of inclusive education usually assumed the schooling of all students within the same educational contexts, focusing on presence, participation, and success. However, in their study, implementation of inclusive education in regular schools had encountered resistance and difficulties that had led to special education schools assuming a complementary role in ensuring that all students' educational needs were met. In this context, the limited scope of inclusive education theories are evident. Thus, in their study it was revealed that there was need to develop new theories to adapt inclusive practices to a carpentry classroom workshop. Their research took place in a carpentry classroom workshop in a Catalan special education school and aimed to identify the various meanings that participants (students and teachers) give to inclusive education, especially regarding presence, participation, success, and relationships between students. The findings indicated that, while literature on inclusive education was divergent, literature on the Sloyd methodology converges. Thus, there was need to explore further research on inclusive education in various contexts in relation to the Sloyd educational methodology [20].

[21] in their study titled 'culturally responsive inclusive education: The value of the local context, investigated the effectiveness of a professional development initiative in inclusive education for teachers who support students with disabilities at the Creative Centre. The findings indicated that staff shifted towards a more positive attitude towards students and reported stronger support for the advocacy for disability and community connectedness. Additionally, staff described the significance of embedding life skills into programs for students with disabilities. The outcomes of the project illustrated evaluated in their study demonstrated how the local culture and context were required to realise the success of effective culturally responsive inclusive education [21].

[22] conducted a study entitled, 'education for the disabled in accordance with the quality of inclusive education in the distance education process.' The aim of their research was to evaluate the disabled education in accordance with the quality of inclusive education in the distance education process in line with the opinions of special education teachers. The research was conducted with 10 special education teachers who were teaching special education and general education in schools with special needs students in Kazakhstan and who agreed to participate in the research voluntarily. A case study design was applied. Research data were generated using a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. As a result of the research, it was revealed that the teachers used online lessons, video sharing, homework control, online activities and mobile applications in the teaching of the lessons in the distance education process; they preferred formal education to distance education; and they found distance education insufficient to meet the individual needs of students in learning. In addition,

teachers stated that they found family participation in distance education and teacher-student peer interaction insufficient. The results obtained from the research revealed the necessity of eliminating the obstacles in the education of the disabled in accordance with the quality of inclusive education [22].

[23] focused their study on 'Spanish Teachers' Perceptions of Their Preparation for Inclusive Education: The Relationship between Age and Years of Teaching Experience.' This study aimed to find potential associations between teachers' preparation and their age and years of teaching experience. A cross-sectional study with a sample of 1275 teachers working in early childhood, primary and secondary education was performed. They answered three dichotomic questions about their initial and ongoing preparation and The Evaluation of Teacher Preparation for Inclusion (CEFI-R) Questionnaire. The dichotomic questions showed that 26.4% of respondents felt qualified to face the challenges of their students' diversity. There were significant inverse associations between the CEFI-R Dimension 1 (diversity conception), Dimension 3 (supports), and Dimension 4 (community participation) and the teachers' age and years of teaching experience. This means that the higher the age or the years of experience, the teachers' perceived preparation for inclusion is worse, which should encourage us to take measures to improve teachers' competencies and preparedness [23].

In Malaysia, [24] conducted a study entitled 'Providing inclusive education through virtual classrooms: a study of the experiences of secondary science teachers in Malaysia during the pandemic.' The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of secondary school teachers in Malaysia in providing a more inclusive education during the pandemic specifically in sciencerelated subjects via virtual classrooms. An online survey was conducted among 126 science teachers. The findings indicated that the readiness of science teachers in providing inclusive education was not high. Their scores in terms of affective attitude, behaviour, cognition, competence and awareness were barely sufficient. Issues such as lack of experience teaching virtually, insufficient training and support from schools and educational authorities, and parents lacking technological competence and skills to facilitate their children's virtual classrooms at home were identified. This study had implications for researchers and educational institutions that intended to promote inclusive education in the context of remote teaching and learning [24].

The study by [25] explored the concept of 'No child left behind.' Using a scoping review, the study aims to analyze the challenges and facilitators of inclusive education in Southern African countries. A comprehensive literature search was conducted in 5 databases, and the retrieved articles were screened in two phases leading to the selection of final sixteen articles. The results were analyzed in a thematic approach under the ecological theory. The analysis of included 16 articles indicates that the region faces similar problems, and inclusive education is constrained by negative attitudes of teachers, peers, and parents, as well as by a lack of resources, poor infrastructure, ineffective policy development, and lack of clear policy implementation. Under facilitators, availability of policies, teacher training, strong support

system coupled with knowledge and understanding of policies were found to promote inclusive education. The overriding theme of the research results was negative views of disability held by Southern African societies. As such the author concludes by emphasizing the importance of developing policies that take into account cultural and environmental factors and an overall mindset change of viewing disability from the traditional and medical point to a social and human rights perspective [25].

[26] in their study on challenges of implementing inclusive education: evidence from selected developing countries noted that inclusive education is deemed to be a noble goal that every nation should strive to achieve. Inclusive education was said to empower people living with disabilities and people without any disabilities to have equal access to educational materials, resources, and training without any discrimination. Nevertheless, the implementation of inclusive education and its related policies has difficulties, especially in developing countries. The findings of the study revealed that societal attitude towards people living with disabilities, poor attitude of the government, inadequate infrastructure, poor funding, and a host of other reasons are the key factors frustrating the implementation of inclusive education, causing the low level of inclusiveness in the developing nations. These findings help inclusive education advocates, international organizations, and governments alike, to narrow their focus on these challenges and develop approaches to overcome them in order to achieve their end goal of inclusive education. It is therefore suggested that government should organize training programmes for teachers and head teachers on how best to manage an inclusive classroom and offer inclusive education [26].

Similar to [26,27] in their study on 'Inclusive education in South Africa: path dependencies and emergences' observed that inclusive education was a fundamental right of all students. Despite international policy initiatives, educational exclusion was pervasive, especially in the Global South, and disproportionately affects disabled students. A qualitative deductive content analysis of South African laws, policies, reports and scholarly literature was applied. Findings show that South Africa represents a complex, contradictory educational environment that confounds the expectation of linear progression towards greater inclusivity. Instead of identifying barriers to inclusive education, we argue for a nuanced understanding of the implications of historical investments and drivers of inequality, with policy possibilities and the impetus for transformation among system actors [27].

[28] undertook a study on 'addressing inclusive education for learners with disabilities in the integrated education system: the dilemma of public primary schools in Kenya. The study explored the challenges and prospects of inclusive education for learners with disabilities in the integrated education system in Kenyan primary schools. Data were generated in five and nine public schools in Nairobi and Marsabit respectively, by means of questionnaires administered to 126 teachers, semi-structured interviews with 14 head teachers or their deputies, and one focus group discussion. County education officials were also interviewed. The findings revealed that although the integrated education system was dominant in Kenya, local schools that accommodate

learners with disabilities put much effort into creating an inclusive setting [28].

[29] observe that within the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and its 17 targets is a strong emphasis on the education of learners with disability. Whereas there have been massive improvements at lower levels regarding education of the marginalised, a lot more work remains undone at tertiary education level. In their discourse, they explored literature to reveal enablers and disablers to academic success of students with visual impairments (SwVI) at higher education level in the past 10 years in 16 countries dotted across six habitable continents. Emergent from the study was a host of disablers such as (i) negative attitudes, (ii) absence of inclusive education policy, (iii) inaccessible learning environment and learning materials, (iv) exclusive pedagogy, and (v) limited orientation and mobility. Amidst the disabling environment, a positive attitude, self-advocacy, and innovativeness stood out as key enablers to academic success by SwVI. The findings contribute to the realisation of the SDG agenda through advocacy on inclusive education policies and practices [29].

## 4. Emergent Major Themes

Emergent from the various sources presented above are a series of themes that epitomizes inclusive education in terms of related and opposite constructs to inclusive education, enablers and disablers to inclusive education.

### 4.1. Related to Inclusive Education

Below are a host of concepts related to inclusive education such as diversity, inclusion, heterogeneity, equity, education for all, normalization, integration and ubuntu among others as captioned in Figure 1.

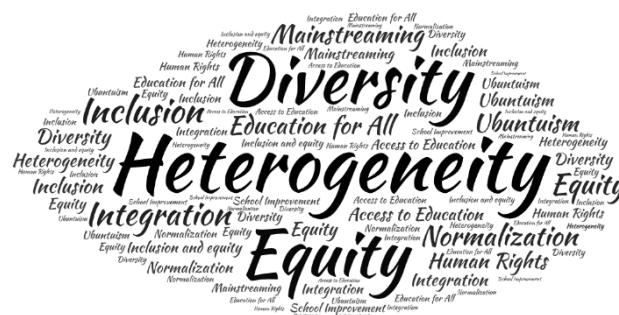


Figure 1. Relatives of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is related to diversity as advanced by [6] and [30]. Diversity speaks to the multiplicity of target groups for inclusion in education such as differently abled learners, learners in rural settings, refugees, learners in emergent environments, girl child, minority learners among others. Diversity points to the need to focus efforts on the most disadvantaged learners to ensure that no one is overlooked since every one's matters equally [6]. This then calls for fairness (equity) in the distribution of resources within the learning spaces according to established needs of the various groupings within the education sector. Whereas diversity implies divergence, not integration,





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