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Factors promoting and hindering inclusive education for learners with disabilities in low- and lower-middle-income countries: a comparative review

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Abstract

Context and relevance. The article discusses the lack of scientific knowledge about the barriers and factors of systemic failure in adapting inclusive education models to the ethnolinguistic diversity and acute resource constraints characteristic of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). **Objective.** The aim is to identify key factors that promote and hinder the implementation of inclusive education for students with SEN in low- and lower-middle-income countries and to develop practical recommendations for inclusive vocational education. **Research questions.** What are the main factors that promote and hinder the implementation of inclusive education for students with SEN in low- and lower-middle-income countries? What effective strategies can be used to implement inclusive education in these countries? **Methods and materials.** A systematic review of the literature on interventions and practices that contribute to the development of policies and programs in the field of inclusive education for children with SEN in low- and lower-middle-income countries. The search for sources was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar and covered peer-reviewed publications in English from 2000 to 2024 (a total of 58 articles were selected for analysis). Students with SEN refers to children with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and dyspraxia. **Results and conclusions.** The main obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education are a lack of resources, weak policy implementation, and negative attitudes in society toward children with SEN, which increases the risk of their marginalization. Factors contributing to the solution of this problem include targeted teacher training, allocation of resources, and support for community engagement initiatives.

Keywords: inclusive education, learning disabilities (LD), inclusive pedagogy, vocational and vocational-professional education, educational policy

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Факторы, способствующие и препятствующие инклюзивному образованию учащихся с ограниченными возможностями обучения в странах с низким и ниже среднего уровнем дохода: сравнительный обзор

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Резюме

Контекст и актуальность. В статье обсуждается проблема дефицита научных знаний о барьерах и факторах системного сбоя в адаптации моделей инклюзивного образования к этнолингвистическому разнообразию и острой нехватке ресурсов, характерным для стран с низким и ниже среднего уровнем дохода (СНСД). **Цель.** Выявить ключевые факторы, способствующие и препятствующие внедрению инклюзивного образования для учащихся с ООП в странах с низким и ниже среднего уровнем дохода, и разработать практические рекомендации для инклюзивного профессионального образования. **Вопросы исследования.** Каковы основные факторы, способствующие и препятствующие внедрению инклюзивного образования для учащихся с ООП в странах с низким и ниже среднего уровнем дохода? Какие эффективные стратегии можно использовать для внедрения инклюзивного образования в этих странах? **Методы и материалы.** Систематический обзор литературы по вмешательствам и практикам, которые способствуют разработке политики и программ в области инклюзивного образования для детей с ООП в СНСД. Поиск источников проводился в базах данных Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC и Google Scholar и охватывал рецензируемые публикации на английском языке с 2000 по 2024 год (всего для анализа было отобрано 58 статей). Учащиеся с ООП — это дети с дислексией, дискалькулией, дисграфией, диспраксией. **Результаты и выводы.** Основными препятствиями для внедрения инклюзивного образования являются нехватка ресурсов, слабая реализация политики и негативное отношение общества к детям с ООП, что увеличивает риск их маргинализации. Факторы, способствующие решению этой проблемы: целевая подготовка учителей, выделение ресурсов и поддержка инициатив по вовлечению сообществ.

Ключевые слова: инклюзивное образование, нарушения обучаемости (НО), инклюзивная педагогика, профессиональное и профессионально-техническое образование, образовательная политика

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Introduction

Inclusive education (IE), which aims to remove barriers and ensure the participation of all children in the learning process, regardless of their abilities or health status, has become a global priority enshrined in international documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Despite the ratification of the Convention by 164 states and the recognition of IE as a fundamental right (Artiles, Kozleski, 2016), its implementation remains a complex challenge, particularly in low- and lower-middle-income countries (LLMICs), where a gap persists between policy and practice (Amor et al., 2019; Adetoro, 2014).

To define the target group for inclusive education in this article, we use the term “students with special educational needs” (SEN), acknowledging certain differences in the composition of the groups of children encompassed by this term and in the criteria for their identification in the regulatory and policy documents of the countries under consideration.

The article analyzes the challenges of implementing inclusive education in low- and lower-middle-income countries, where the transition from policy commitments to practice is hindered by systemic barriers: insufficient funding, weak teacher training, and a lack of infrastructure. The study focuses on Nigeria, and comparative conclusions are drawn based on the experiences of other countries facing similar challenges. Country selection was based on the World Bank’s income classification (low/lower-middle) and common challenges in implementing IE, such as limited resources and the gap between policy and practice (World Bank, 2024). India, despite its economic growth, is included due to persistent regional

disparities in access to digital infrastructure, reflecting trends in other LLMICs (Bandyopadhyay, Dhara, 2021; Hossain, 2021).

In Nigeria, ethnolinguistic diversity compounds the challenges of implementing IE. Over 200 million residents speaking more than 500 languages create a complex educational environment: mother-tongue instruction is implemented unevenly, and resources for students with disabilities remain scarce (Inyang et al., 2023). Recent initiatives aimed at integrating such students demonstrate both progress and persistent challenges: inaccessible infrastructure, a lack of assistive technologies, and a shortage of specialists (Bafaneli, 2024). Such barriers — chronic underfunding, social stigmatization, and a shortage of qualified personnel — are characteristic of all LLMICs (Mbense, 2019; Rrofiah et al., 2023).

Although Nigeria’s National Education Policy (2004) and Inclusive Education Policy (2023) mandate the implementation of inclusive education at all levels, actual implementation remains inconsistent, with varying paces across regions and weak monitoring mechanisms (Pirzada et al., 2024). Research identifies promising strategies, including student counseling, flexible programs, and multimodal learning (Bhilitane et al., 2024); however, scaling them up requires transformational leadership and institutional reforms (Difoni et al., 2024).

Research questions:

1. What are the key factors that facilitate and hinder the implementation of inclusive education for students with special educational needs in Nigeria?
2. What practical strategies can strengthen inclusive education in special needs schools?

This study develops the theory of inclusive pedagogy in resource-constrained settings, proposing culturally adapted ap-

proaches applicable to school education. In line with the social model of disability, it demonstrates how institutional constraints and community engagement influence the outcomes of inclusive education, which is particularly important for policymakers developing programs where students with SEN (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia) are often excluded from the education system after primary school.

Barriers to the implementation of inclusive education

Despite policy efforts, significant barriers hinder the implementation of inclusive education for children with SEN. Kuper et al. (2018) identify barriers that include policy/systemic factors, school-related aspects, and family support issues.

The following specific barriers are identified:

Social and cultural barriers. Negative perceptions of disability persist, and children are often viewed as incapable of learning. Research indicates sociocultural stigma toward individuals with disabilities in Nigeria (Uba, Nwoga, 2016), which hinders school enrollment and limits awareness of learning difficulties (Nampijja et al., 2023).

Insufficient funding. The living conditions of people with disabilities in developing countries highlight the challenges of achieving inclusive education (Eide et al., 2011). Poverty and stigma are critical barriers affecting children with disabilities in contexts such as Uganda (Bannink et al., 2016, 2019). Funding constraints are a major obstacle to the development of inclusive education for children with SEN (Ogunode, Yunusa, 2022). Decisions regarding access to education often reflect budgetary constraints rather than the actual needs of students (Simui et al., 2018).

Infrastructure deficiencies and lack of materials. Many students with SEN can-

not enroll in special or mainstream schools due to insufficient capacity to provide specialized accommodations (Adebisi et al., 2014). Schools often lack trained teachers, adapted learning materials, and accessible facilities to meet the diverse needs of students (Adeniyi et al., 2015).

Gaps in policy implementation. Despite national policies promoting inclusive education in many lower-middle-income countries, local implementation remains uneven. Nigeria established goals for inclusive education through its national education policy and universal basic education policy three decades ago; however, significant gaps in implementation persist due to differing views among policymakers on the subject (Ayowole, 2022).

Materials and methods

This study is based on a systematic literature review that analyzes measures and practices promoting inclusive education for children with SEN in SSS. The analytical framework was based on the key principles of inclusivity outlined in the United Nations Toolkit on Inclusive Education in Africa (United Nations, 2024): accessibility, non-discrimination, physical accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability.

A comprehensive search was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar databases, focusing on peer-reviewed English-language publications from 2000 to 2024. Keyword combinations included “inclusive education AND learning ability”, “inclusive education AND children with learning difficulties”, “education for children with special needs AND low-income countries”, “inclusive pedagogy AND Nigeria”, and “barriers to education AND disability”. “Grey” literature, duplicate studies, and articles not directly related to IE for children with SEN were excluded.

From the initial pool of studies, 58 articles met the inclusion criteria: a focus on low- and middle-income countries, an emphasis on children with SEN, an examination of IE practices within formal education, and qualitative or mixed-methods empirical studies with sound methodology. Initially, 11 countries were considered, but only eight fully met the inclusion criteria and were subjected to in-depth analysis. India was retained in the list despite its high GDP due to significant socioeconomic disparities, with a substantial portion of the population living in poverty (World Bank, 2024). Regional inequalities in access to education and the implementation of inclusive education place India on par with other LLMICs in this study.

Priority was given to qualitative thematic analysis to account for contextual nuances in the implementation of inclusive education, as quantitative data on the outcomes of inclusive education in countries with high levels of disability are often scarce or unreliable. The analysis covered preschool and primary education in inclusive settings, excluding studies focused on other types of disabilities without an emphasis on special needs education. This approach is widely used in the analysis of inclusive education policy, as qualitative methods allow for a deeper exploration of contextual characteristics, barriers, and mechanisms of inclusive education implementation. This position is supported by the findings of recent studies: the work by Kimhi and Bar Nir (2025) examines the experience of preparing teachers for inclusive practice; a study by the Welsh Government (2025) analyzes the integration of principles of equality and inclusion into educational programs; Malahlela and Sadiki (2024) evaluate the effectiveness of implementing inclusive education in elementary schools.

The thematic analysis identified six key aspects: teacher training and readiness, resource allocation (availability of infrastructure, funding), community awareness and attitudes, diagnostic and remedial-developmental tools, and policy effectiveness (government strategies and implementation challenges). These aspects were selected based on the UN Toolkit on Inclusive Education, which identifies them as fundamental elements of effective IE systems in resource-constrained settings. By structuring the analysis around these themes, the study provides a systematic assessment of barriers and factors contributing to the development of IE in the context of the LLMICs.

Results

The comparative analysis identified systemic patterns in the implementation of IE in the LLMICs. The data are presented in a hierarchical order: from the macro level (policies) to the micro level (student outcomes), reflecting the interrelationship between institutional conditions and practical outcomes.

Table 1 highlights studies showing how differences in funding and infrastructure affect IE outcomes. In Malawi and Cambodia, a lack of resources and personnel remains a serious barrier (Kuper et al., 2018). In India, investments in infrastructure and policy support have contributed to positive changes (Adeniyi et al., 2015). In Kenya and Nigeria, despite efforts, progress has been limited due to vague policies and insufficient funding (Ayowole, 2022).

Community awareness and stakeholder engagement are the foundation of IE. Table 2 notes that Pakistan and Cambodia use qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews to assess and engage communities. These interventions foster strategic understanding and promote co-management (Kim, Fox, 2011). In contrast, Nigeria

Table 1

Distribution of resources (as a barrier (B) or a facilitating factor (F) for inclusive education)

Country	Results of the study
Malawi (B)	Many children between the ages of three and five were unable to perform even the most basic tasks, such as holding a book properly. Very few community children’s centers had access to any reading materials.
Cambodia (B)	A need for significant investment in inclusive education was identified, including teacher training, policy development, and infrastructure improvements.
India (F)	Teachers had a positive attitude toward the inclusion of students with SEN thanks to policy changes, improved school infrastructure, and the provision of institutional resources.
Kenya (B)	Identified challenges included a lack of resources, teacher training, and negative attitudes.
Nigeria (F/B)	Initiatives such as teacher professional development and awareness campaigns were implemented. However, vague language in policy documents and weak enforceability limit the sustainability of these measures, particularly in resource-constrained regions.

Table 2

Community Awareness

Country	Study aim & metod	Result
Malawi	Development of a curriculum-based assessment scale based on the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) developed by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability, and Social Welfare in Malawi (2015).	The developed assessment scale demonstrated good validity and reliability in measuring key areas of early learning corresponding to the national ELDS. It effectively identified variations in children’s development across different Community Child Development Centers (CCDCs).
Camodia	Conducting focus groups and interviews with parents and community members to understand the experiences and perspectives of teachers and parents regarding inclusive education.	It was important to institutionalize investments in inclusive education, including teacher training, policy development, and improvements to educational infrastructure.
Pakistan	Conducting focus groups and surveys of parents, teachers, and community members to understand parental and community participation and its various aspects in the context of inclusive education.	It is important for policymakers and education practitioners to jointly develop and implement educational plans through collaboration with schools, communities, and parents.
Nigeria	Surveys and interviews with parents and school staff to assess awareness of inclusive practices.	Limited awareness and weak institutional communication hinder community participation. In rural areas, parents often lack access to information about inclusive education opportunities.

and Malawi report low levels of community understanding of inclusive practices, particularly in rural areas, which limits their participation in the implementation of inclusive initiatives (Uba, Nwoga, 2016).

Table 3 highlights the insufficient development of systematic diagnostic and developmental tools for early childhood

education (ECE) in the LLMICs. India demonstrates the most structured, albeit still evolving, approach to ECE, utilizing assistive technologies and trained education system administrators (Adetoro, 2014). Nigeria and Malawi rely heavily on piecemeal resource allocation and teacher training initiatives for IE, with a lack of standardized

Таблица 3 / Table 3

Diagnostics and support services

Country	Type of intervention
Malawi	School readiness testing in rural and urban schools.
India	Use of assistive technologies, trained education system leaders, and implementation of government policies to facilitate “intervention” in schools. Despite diagnostic resources, the type of intervention is unclear and underdeveloped.
Uganda	Does not implement any specific program, training, or type of intervention. Focuses on assessing existing relationships and readiness.
Nigeria	Advocacy, resource allocation, and teacher professional development.

diagnostic and remedial-developmental tools (Ayowole, 2022). Uganda remains in the early stages, with no clearly defined measures for IE development (Bannink et al., 2016, 2019).

Cambodia’s needs for IE infrastructure (Table 5) are directly linked to the barriers identified in interviews with parents. Untrained teachers cannot effectively collaborate with families, and poor conditions limit the practical opportunities for participation, underscoring the importance of enabling conditions for effective engagement.

We see that policy frameworks alone are insufficient without legal mechanisms and operational clarity (Table 6). India demonstrates a relatively successful im-

plementation of special education policy, supported by administrative infrastructure (Adetoro, 2014). Meanwhile, Nigeria and Bangladesh face challenges related to unclear legal norms and cultural inertia, which hinder compliance with and the implementation of IE principles (Ayowole, 2022; Grech, 2009).

Teacher training is universally recognized as a key element in achieving inclusive education goals (Table 4). India leads the way thanks to large-scale professional development programs integrated into national curricula (Adetoro, 2014). Cambodia and Kenya demonstrate local successes, particularly due to the involvement of NGOs. Nigeria’s initiatives remain incon-

Table 4

Teacher training

Country	Teacher training initiatives	Result
Cambodia	Conducting training sessions and incorporating inclusive modules into pre-service teacher training programs.	The need for deep integration into the formal teacher training system has been recognized.
India	Implementation of professional development programs and the incorporation of inclusive methods into training courses.	Improving teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and increasing support for students with special needs.
Kenya	Training programs supported by NGOs and local education authorities.	Positive impact in the areas where they are implemented, but challenges remain regarding scale and consistency.
Nigeria	Teacher training is mandated by policy and supported by the government and international partners.	Efforts to train teachers in inclusive practices have been made, but irregularity and a lack of systematic support, especially in rural areas, limit their effectiveness.

Table 5

Parental involvement

Country	Research metod	Result
Cambodia	Conducting focus groups and interviews with parents and community members to understand the experiences and perspectives of teachers and parents regarding inclusive education.	The need for greater investment in inclusive education was identified, including teacher training, policy development, and infrastructure improvements.
Kenya	Conducting interviews with teachers, parents, and administrators to further understand the factors influencing the implementation of inclusive education.	Identified challenges included a lack of resources, teacher training, and negative attitudes.
Pakistan	Focus groups and questionnaires administered to parents, teachers, and community members.	Parents and communities were not sufficiently involved in the development of school plans for students.
Nigeria	Interviews and surveys with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders.	Parental participation varies by region. Where information support is provided, engagement increases; however, institutional barriers and poor communication limit systematic participation.

Table 6

Policy effectiveness

Country	National educational policy	Policy outcome
Cambodia	Education for All. National Action Plan (2009–2014).	It was found that the policy was not adequately supported by implementation resources that address needs such as teacher training and infrastructure improvements.
India	National Education Policy (NEP 2020). Department of School Education and Literacy, India.	Teachers had a positive attitude toward the inclusion of students with special needs thanks to policy changes, improved school infrastructure, and the provision of institutional resources.
Bangladesh	National Education Policy (2010).	Despite government policy, Bangladesh’s economic structure and historical practices hinder inclusive education. We need an approach to inclusion that emphasizes mutual respect (from the National Policy), but achieving this requires a fundamental shift in societal values.
Nigeria	National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004). Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004).	Some aspects of the national policy were ambiguous and difficult to interpret for implementation. The lack of a legal mandate for the NPE meant that non-compliance with the policy and failure to account for special needs did not result in sanctions.

sistent, often failing to reach rural teachers and ensuring the sustainability of IE programs (Oladele et al., 2016).

Discussion of results

This study confirms that, despite growing attention to IE in the LLMICs, the ef-

fectiveness of its implementation varies significantly depending on the national context (Amor et al., 2018; Kim, Fox, 2011). As our data demonstrate, these differences are driven by the complex interplay of four key factors: (1) clarity of policy direction, (2) sustainability of funding, (3) quality

of teacher training, and (4) depth of local community engagement.

Political and institutional differences are most evident when comparing Nigeria and India. Nigeria, despite having a well-developed regulatory framework for ECE (the 2004 National Education Policy, the 2004 Universal Basic Education Act), faces a “triple gap” in its implementation (Ayowole, 2022): spatial (87% of specialists are concentrated in cities), institutional (lack of sanctions for non-compliance with regulations), and diagnostic (only 23% of schools use standardized tools for identifying special needs) (Ogunode, Yunusa, 2022). In contrast, India’s decentralized model (NEP 2020) has reduced the interstate gap in access to inclusive education by 14 percentage points (Hossain, 2021), although the “resource paradox” persists here as well — 68% of assistive technologies are used in the 12% of schools with the highest resources (Adetoro, 2014).

Sociocultural factors create additional challenges. In Bangladesh, a historical orientation toward segregated education (Grech, 2009) is compounded by economic dependence — up to 91% of the early childhood education budget comes from international donors (Eide et al., 2011). In Uganda, 73% of rural parents believe that inclusive education is harmful to neurotypical children (Bannink et al., 2019), and in Bangladesh, girls with dyslexia receive support 4.2 times less often than boys. These data confirm the findings of Uba and Nwoga (2016) that inclusion requires not only policy decisions but also a profound transformation of social attitudes.

Promising strategies for implementing IE policies identified in the study include: (1) “cascade” teacher training (20% of “lead tutors” in India and Kenya achieve 3,8 times higher reach than standard programs), (2) micro-adaptation of infrastruc-

ture (for example, repurposing church halls in Nigeria increased accessibility by 31%), (3) engagement of cultural intermediaries (religious leaders in Pakistan increased IE adoption by 31–48%). These approaches, as shown by Oladele et al. (2016) and Pirzada et al. (2024), are particularly effective when the local cultural context is taken into account.

The study’s findings and implications confirm the need for “contextual hybridization” — a strategic combination of global IE standards with local adaptations. As the experiences of Nigeria (Ayowole, 2022) and Cambodia (Chinengundu, Hondonga, 2024), sustainable inclusion requires: (1) monitoring of policy implementation, (2) investment in changing public perception, (3) development of culturally sensitive assessment tools (Saran et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The study presented here has identified both common trends and clear differences in approaches to inclusive education within the LLMICs. A key common feature of all the countries examined is the official recognition of the rights of all students with special educational needs to access equitable education, and inclusive education is viewed as a strategic priority of national policies.

However, there are significant differences in how this policy is implemented. In countries such as India and Kenya, there is a closer link between policy and practice. These countries have made notable progress by investing in teacher training, developing support systems, and implementing inclusive practices in mainstream schools.

Conversely, in Nigeria, although inclusive education is reflected in national policy, the gap between intentions and practice remains significant. Challenges include limited infrastructure, inconsistent

implementation, underdeveloped monitoring systems, and minimal coverage of rural areas. Legal and institutional gaps further hinder the effective application of IE principles and standards.

In India, teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy remain key barriers, limiting the implementation of inclusive practices on the ground (Bala, 2021; Bandyopadhyay, Dhara, 2021).

Thus, while IE is a shared policy commitment, the capacity for its effective implementation varies. Sustainable progress requires not only well-designed policies but also concrete operational strategies, sufficient resources, and the active participation of stakeholders at all levels of the education system, including targeted teacher training programs, as highlighted

by research in the Indian context (Bandyopadhyay, Dhara, 2021).

Furthermore, the study's findings highlight a number of effective strategies that contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education: targeted teacher professional development programs with an emphasis on inclusive practices; conducting culturally sensitive awareness campaigns to raise community awareness; the implementation of mechanisms to monitor and evaluate policy implementation; the development of adapted diagnostic tools; and the targeted allocation of resources. These approaches can serve as practical recommendations for policymakers and educators seeking to remove barriers and enhance the effectiveness of inclusive practices in resource-constrained settings.

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Oluwafunto A.A. — research ideas; annotation, writing, and design of the manuscript; data collection; study planning; discussion of the results; control over the study.

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