

A Comparative Study Of Global And National Inclusive Education Policies

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education aims to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners including marginalized groups, economically disadvantaged children, and children with disabilities within a common education system. Guided by international frameworks such as the UNESCO education 2030 framework, the Salamanca statement, and the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities developed by UNESCO and the United Nations, many countries have adopted policies promoting inclusive practices. **Purpose:** this study compares global inclusive education frameworks with India's national policy to examine their alignment and implementation. **Method:** A qualitative comparative analysis was conducted using secondary sources, including government documents, academic literature, scholarly articles, newspapers, and thesis. **Major Findings:** the study finds that although inclusive education is legally recognized across many countries, a significant gap remains between policy intentions and actual classroom practices, particularly in developing contexts. Global frameworks strongly influence national policies, yet local challenges hinder effective implementation. **Policy implications:** strengthening inclusive education requires context-specific strategies, sustained teacher professional development, adequate resource allocation, and robust accountability mechanisms to translate policy into practice. This study contributes to ongoing policy discourse by highlighting the need for stronger alignment between global commitments and national execution to ensure equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for all.

Keywords: Inclusive education, education policy, international frameworks and Comparative study.

Introduction

Inclusive education refers to an approach that integrates all learners within a unified educational framework by removing barriers to participation and recognizing learner diversity as a valuable resource for teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2009). The concept was formally advanced through international advocacy led by UNESCO, particularly the Salamanca Statement, which emphasized educating children with and without disabilities together in mainstream schools through flexible curricula, inclusive pedagogies, and supportive environments (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education therefore seeks not only to expand access but also to transform education systems so that they respond to the needs of all learners (UNESCO, 2017).

Inclusive education has gained global significance as a means of promoting equity, social justice, and equal access to quality education (United Nations, 2016). It supports the participation of learners from marginalised communities, socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and diverse cultural contexts, thereby reducing educational inequalities (UNESCO, 2020). Beyond academic outcomes, inclusive schooling contributes to social cohesion, mutual respect, and democratic citizenship by fostering interaction among diverse groups (UNESCO, 2020). In contemporary societies, it is increasingly viewed as essential for building inclusive communities and sustainable development (United Nations, 2025).

Recent global reports highlight both progress and continuing challenges in implementing inclusive education worldwide. The UNESCO Global education monitoring report stresses that effective leadership,

teacher preparation, and institutional support are essential for successful implementation (UNESCO, 2024). It also notes widening inequalities related to digital access and infrastructure (UNESCO, 2023). Initiatives by the United Nations emphasize that inclusive education in the digital era requires equitable access to technology, trained educators, and inclusive digital policies (United Nations, 2025). The national education policy (NEP), 2020 emphasizes that “education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality” (Department of school education & literacy [DSEL], Ministry of education, government of India, 2020), which has implications for the development of an inclusive community and society at large. In order for policy to translate into practice, educational barriers, facilities, and services for children with special needs (CwSN) must be addressed. According to the national council for teacher education (2021), inclusive education is realized when all children in society are educated together in the same schools. To make this possible, schools must adapt and make necessary changes to meet the diverse needs of all learners. Inclusive education therefore ensures that every child, regardless of individual differences, learns in the same age-appropriate classroom and receives equal access to the curriculum.

Global Perspective

At the international level, inclusive education is recognised as a fundamental human right and a central component of educational reform (United Nations, 2006). The United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development highlights this commitment through sustainable development goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Recent global reports emphasize that achieving this goal requires systemic reforms, effective leadership, trained teachers, accessible infrastructure, and inclusive digital policies (UNESCO, 2023). For instance, recent global education monitoring reports highlight persistent inequalities in digital access, leadership capacity, and institutional support, particularly in developing countries (UNESCO, 2023). Similarly, United Nations progress reports stress that equitable access to technology and inclusive digital strategies are increasingly critical in the post-pandemic education landscape (United Nations, 2024).

Despite significant policy commitments worldwide, many countries continue to face implementation challenges due to limited resources, insufficient teacher preparation, and infrastructural constraints (UNESCO, 2020). These barriers contribute to a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, especially in low- and middle-income contexts (World Bank, 2021). Consequently, inclusive education remains both a global priority and an ongoing challenge.

Indian context

In India, inclusive education has been strengthened through the Ministry of Education’s National Education Policy 2020, which identifies education as a key instrument for achieving social justice and equality (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy emphasizes equitable access for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, gender minorities, and other marginalized communities (Ministry of Education, 2020). It proposes measures such as accessible infrastructure, teacher capacity building, assistive technologies, and support services to ensure participation of all learners in mainstream schooling (Ministry of Education, 2020). By aligning with global commitments while addressing national priorities, India’s policy framework reflects contextual adaptation to the country’s diverse socio-economic and cultural landscape.

However, translating policy into practice remains a significant challenge. Reports from national bodies such as the National Council for Teacher Education indicate that successful implementation requires schools to adapt curricula, pedagogy, and infrastructure to meet diverse learning needs (National Council for Teacher Education, 2021). Persistent issues including resource disparities, limited professional training, and uneven monitoring continue to hinder effective inclusion across regions.

Review of Related Literature

D’Alessio and Watkins (2009) further noted methodological challenges in comparing inclusive education internationally, including differences in definitions of inclusion and identification of special educational needs, which complicate policy evaluation.

Hardy and Woodcock (2014), using a critical policy sociology perspective, argued that neoliberal influences such as market-oriented reforms and efficiency discourses – can dilute commitments to inclusion by prioritizing competition over equity.

Puja and Ahmad Dar (2021) showed evolving emphasis on teacher training, equity, and support for disadvantaged learners across successive national policies.

Devi (2022) similarly highlighted that the National Education Policy 2020 aims to transform educational structures and promote equitable opportunities but faces implementation challenges due to scale and diversity.

Marcano Molano et al. (2023) revealed that Ecuador and Peru have made policy progress but still face disparities in translating commitments into practice. Within Europe, Smyth et al. (2014) demonstrated that countries formally support inclusion under international and regional frameworks yet differ significantly in implementation due to historical and structural factors.

Shahin (2025) identified weak implementation in Bangladesh due to limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and fragmented governance, despite supportive legislation. Comparable findings were reported in Pakistan (Akhtar, 2025) and ASEAN contexts (Ridwan et al., 2025), suggesting systemic barriers common to developing countries.

Filippou et al. (2025), in a systematic review of higher education research, emphasized learner-centred curricula, flexible assessment, and accessible environment as essential components of inclusive practice. Studies consistently report shortages of trained teachers, insufficient professional development, and support services as major barriers.

Ridwan et al. (2025) found that Indonesia and Malaysia have incorporated international conventions into national legislation; however, Indonesia's decentralized governance produces uneven implementation, whereas Malaysia's centralized system enables more standardized execution. Similarly, Akhtar (2025) reported that Pakistan has ratified global conventions but continues to rely heavily on segregated schooling, indicating partial alignment with rights-based inclusion.

Research Gap

While existing studies provide valuable cross-national insights, many focus on single regions or levels of education. There remains a need for comprehensive comparative analyses examining how global frameworks interact with national policies – particularly in large and diverse systems such as India. This study addresses that gap by systematically comparing international policy frameworks with national policy provisions to assess alignment and implementation challenges.

Significance of the study

Inclusive education is essential for ensuring equal learning opportunities for all students, especially those from marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Global frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement, United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities, and sustainable development goal 4 have guided countries toward inclusive practices. However, differences in national contexts often influence how these policies are interpreted and implemented. In India, efforts towards inclusion have been strengthened through the national education policy 2020, yet challenges such as lack of resources, teacher training, and infrastructure remain. Therefore, this comparative study is significant because it helps understand the alignment between global commitments and national actions, identifies gaps in implementation, and provides insights for improving inclusive education systems.

Objective of the study

- i. To examine major global inclusive education policies and frameworks.
- ii. To compare the similarities and differences between global and national policies.

Research questions

- i. What are the key principles of global inclusive education policies?
- ii. What similarities and differences exist between global and national inclusive education policies?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine global and national policies on inclusive education. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting policy intentions, principles, and implementation frameworks rather than measuring numerical outcomes. Through comparative policy analysis, the study systematically explores the similarities and differences between international frameworks and India's national education policy, allowing for a deeper understanding of how inclusive education is conceptualized, articulated and operationalized within different governance structures. The research is guided by a qualitative document analysis framework supported by content coding and thematic comparison. In this process, key policy documents were carefully reviewed to identify recurring concepts, principles, and strategies related to inclusive education. The analysis involved close reading of selected policy texts to understand their objectives, scope, and provisions regarding inclusion, followed by the coding of key themes such as equity, access, disability inclusion, teacher preparation, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms. These coded themes were then compared across global and national documents to identify areas of convergence and divergence. The study relies on secondary data drawn from authoritative policy documents and relevant scholarly literature. The primary documents analyzed include major international and national policy frameworks, namely the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities -CRPD (United Nations, 2006), Sustainable Development Goal 4-SDG-4 (United Nations, 2015), and India's National Education Policy– NEP 2020 (Government of India, 2020). These documents provide the foundational basis for examining how inclusive education is framed and promoted across global and national policy contexts.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Objective & Research Question 1:

Global inclusive education policies aim to ensure that all learners—regardless of disability, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, language or other differences have equal access to quality education. These principles are reflected in international frameworks such as the UNESCO guidelines, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the education goal of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).

The key Principles of Global Inclusive Education Policies

- i. **Equity and Equal Opportunity:** Inclusive education ensures that every learner has fair access to education regardless of background, disability, gender, religion or socio-economic status. Policies aim to remove systemic barriers that prevent participation.
- ii. **Non-Discrimination:** Education systems must eliminate discrimination in admission, participation, and learning outcomes. Schools should be open to all learners and respect human rights and dignity.
- iii. **Access and Participation:** All students should be able to enroll, attend and actively participate in learning within mainstream educational settings rather than being segregated.
- iv. **Respect for Diversity:** Inclusive policies recognize that learner diversity is normal and valuable. Differences in abilities, languages, cultures and learning styles are treated as strengths rather than obstacles.
- v. **Flexible Curriculum and Teaching Methods:** Curriculum, teaching strategies, and assessment methods should be adaptable to meet varied learning needs. This may include differentiated instruction, individualized learning plans and assistive technologies.
- vi. **Support Systems and Resources:** Inclusive education requires trained teachers, support staff, learning aids and accessible infrastructure so that learners with different needs receive appropriate support.
- vii. **Community and Stakeholder Participation:** Families, communities, educators, and policymakers must **collaborate** to support inclusive schooling and ensure that policies reflect the needs of all learners.
- viii. **Accountability and Monitoring:** Governments and institutions must monitor implementation, collect data and evaluate outcomes to ensure inclusive policies translate into practice.
- ix. **Quality Education for All:** Inclusion is not only about access but also about ensuring meaningful learning outcomes and equal educational quality for every learner.
- x. **Lifelong Learning Approach:** Inclusive education policies often promote learning opportunities across all stages of life, from early childhood to higher education and vocational training.

Objective & Research Question 2:

The comparative analysis of global and national inclusive education policies reveals substantial alignment in their commitment to equity, access and non-discrimination, while also highlighting contextual differences in implementation strategies.

Comparative analysis of global frameworks and Indian policy

Dimension	Global frameworks	Indian policy
vision and objectives	Emphasize education as a fundamental human right and promote inclusive schooling for all learners, particularly marginalized groups	Aligns with global vision while integrating inclusion within national socio-economic development goals
implementation mechanisms	Recommend systemic reforms, inclusive curricula, and removal of barriers to participation	Focuses on policy initiatives such as equitable access, gender inclusion funds, and support for disadvantaged groups
Teacher preparation	Stress specialized training for inclusive pedagogy and capacity building	Emphasizes teacher education reforms and training for handling diverse learning needs
infrastructure and accessibility	Advocate accessible school environments and assistive technologies	Calls for barrier-free infrastructure, resource centres, and digital inclusion initiatives
monitoring and evaluation	Encourage accountability through international commitments and reporting	proposes institutional mechanisms and data-driven monitoring systems

Vision and objectives

International frameworks such as the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasise inclusive education as a fundamental human right grounded in equality and social justice. These frameworks advocate education systems that accommodate all learners regardless of disability, socio-economic status, or background.

India's National Education Policy 2020 reflects these commitments by promoting equitable and inclusive education for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, and gender inclusion. However, it contextualizes inclusion within national development priorities, linking educational equity to broader goals social and economic progress.

Implementation mechanisms

Global frameworks recommend systemic reforms such as inclusive curricula, community participation, and removal of structural barriers to learning. For example, UNESCO guidelines emphasize adapting teaching methods to learner diversity rather than expecting learners to fit rigid systems. NEP2020 operationalizes these principles through targeted initiative, including special education zones, gender inclusion funds, and support programs for disadvantaged groups. This demonstrates alignment with global principles while adapting strategies to India's governance and demographic context.

Teacher preparation

Teacher capacity is identified as a critical factor in successful inclusion. Global policies stress continuous professional development in inclusive pedagogies and collaborative teaching approaches. NEP2020 similarly prioritizes teacher education reforms, including training in inclusive classrooms practices, early identification of learning needs, and use of assistive technologies. However, implementation challenges persist due to shortages of trained personnel and limited professional support systems.

Infrastructure and accessibility

Global frameworks call for barrier-free physical environments, accessible learning materials, and assistive technologies to support diverse learners. India's policy echoes these provisions by promoting accessible infrastructure, resource centres. And digital platforms to enhance participation. Nevertheless, disparities in infrastructure across regions remain a significant barrier to effective implementation.

Monitoring and evaluation

International agreements emphasize accountability through monitoring mechanisms and periodic reporting on progress toward inclusive education goals. NEP 2020 proposes data-driven monitoring systems and institutional accountability measures. However, weak enforcement and limited coordination often create gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities.

Discussion in relation to theoretical perspectives

The findings support human rights theory, which views education as an inherent right that must be accessible to all individuals. Both global and national policies frame inclusion within this rights-based approach. Additionally, the results align with social justice theory in education, emphasizing fairness, participation, and removal of systemic inequalities. The integration of inclusion into broader development goals in India reflects a contextualized application of these theories in a developing country setting.

Policy implications and future directions

The analysis highlights that effective implantation of inclusive education requires coordinated efforts across policy, institutional, and community levels. Key policy implications include:

- Strengthening teacher training and professional development
- Increasing investment in accessible infrastructure and learning resources
- Enhancing monitoring and accountability mechanisms
- Promoting community awareness and participation

Future directions should focus on bridging the gap between policy and practices through sustained funding, research-based interventions, and context-specific strategies. Leveraging technology and data systems can further support inclusive practices and ensure equitable learning opportunities for all.

Findings

- i. The analysis shows that global education frameworks strongly emphasize inclusive education as a fundamental human right. International policies advocate equal access to quality education for all learners, irrespective of disability, gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity or language.
- ii. Key principles such as equity, non-discrimination, access and participation, respect for diversity, and quality education for all are consistently reflected across major global education policies and frameworks.
- iii. Global policies highlight that inclusion is not limited to school enrollment. It also involves meaningful participation, active engagement in learning and equal opportunities to achieve educational outcomes.
- iv. The study indicates that inclusive education policies emphasize adaptable curricula, differentiated instruction, individualized learning plans, and the use of assistive technologies to accommodate diverse learning needs.
- v. Both global frameworks and national policies recognize that well-trained teachers are essential for implementing inclusive education. Continuous professional development and training in inclusive pedagogy are strongly recommended.
- vi. Effective implementation of inclusive education requires adequate support systems such as trained support staff, accessible learning materials, assistive devices and appropriate infrastructure.
- vii. The findings highlight that collaboration among families, communities, educators, and policymakers plays a crucial role in ensuring successful implementation of inclusive education policies.

- viii. The study reveals that India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) aligns closely with global inclusive education frameworks in terms of promoting equity, accessibility, and educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups.
- ix. While global frameworks present universal principles, Indian policy adapts these principles to national priorities by linking inclusive education with socio-economic development and national progress.
- x. NEP 2020 introduces several initiatives such as gender inclusion funds, special education zones, and targeted programs for socio-economically disadvantaged groups to promote equitable access to education.
- xi. Despite policy commitments, disparities in infrastructure, accessibility, and availability of assistive technologies continue to affect the effective implementation of inclusive education in many regions.
- xii. Although both global and national frameworks emphasize monitoring and evaluation, gaps remain between policy provisions and their implementation at the institutional and classroom levels.
- xiii. The study confirms that inclusive education policies are grounded in human rights theory and social justice theory, which emphasize equal opportunities, fairness and removal of systemic barriers in education.
- xiv. The study identifies the need for stronger investment in teacher training, infrastructure development, and learning resources to ensure that inclusive education policies are effectively implemented.
- xv. One of the major findings is that despite strong policy frameworks, practical implementation remains uneven. Sustained funding, research-based strategies, and effective coordination are necessary to translate policy commitments into real educational inclusion.

Discussion of the Result

The findings of the present study align closely with the existing body of literature on inclusive education policies at both global and national levels. The analysis demonstrates that global frameworks strongly promote inclusive education as a fundamental human right, emphasizing equity, access, non-discrimination, and meaningful participation for all learners. This orientation reflects the principles embedded in international frameworks such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) guidelines, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which collectively advocate equitable and inclusive quality education.

The study further reveals that many countries formally align their national policies with these global commitments, but the extent of implementation varies significantly depending on governance structures and socio-economic contexts. This observation is consistent with the findings of Ridwan et al. (2025), who noted that while Indonesia and Malaysia have integrated international conventions into their national legislation, differences in governance systems influence implementation outcomes. Indonesia's decentralized structure often results in uneven implementation across regions, whereas Malaysia's centralized approach promotes greater policy uniformity. Similarly, Akhtar (2025) reported that Pakistan has ratified several global conventions on inclusive education but continues to rely heavily on segregated schooling, indicating only partial alignment with rights-based inclusion. These studies support the present research finding that policy commitments alone do not guarantee effective inclusive practices.

The findings of the present study also resonate with the work of Marcano Molano et al. (2023), who examined inclusive education reforms in Ecuador and Peru. Their research highlighted that although policy frameworks demonstrate strong commitment to inclusive education, disparities persist in translating policy goals into classroom practices. A similar pattern is observed in the current analysis of India's National Education Policy 2020, which aligns closely with global inclusive education principles but faces challenges in implementation due to variations in infrastructure, availability of resources, and institutional capacity. These parallels suggest that bridging the gap between policy formulation and practical implementation remains a common challenge across many countries.

Within the European context, Smyth et al. (2014) demonstrated that despite formal adherence to inclusive education principles under international and regional agreements, implementation differs widely due to historical, structural, and institutional factors. The results of the present study similarly indicate that contextual conditions play a crucial role in determining how inclusive education policies are enacted at the national and institutional levels. In India, inclusive education initiatives such as gender inclusion funds, special education zones, and targeted support for socio-economically disadvantaged groups illustrate attempts to adapt global principles to national development priorities. However, disparities in infrastructure, teacher training, and access to assistive technologies continue to affect the effective realization of these policies.

Another important finding of this study is the role of structural and resource-related constraints in limiting policy implementation. Shahin (2025) identified similar challenges in Bangladesh, where inclusive education policies are supported by legislation but remain weakly implemented due to limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and fragmented governance. Comparable issues have also been documented in Pakistan (Akhtar, 2025) and other ASEAN contexts (Ridwan et al., 2025). The present study reinforces these findings by highlighting that insufficient resources, lack of trained personnel, and uneven institutional support continue to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education policies, particularly in developing countries.

The emphasis on teacher preparation and professional development observed in the present study also aligns with existing research. Filippou et al. (2025), in their systematic review of higher education research, emphasized that inclusive education requires learner-centred curricula, flexible assessment systems, and accessible learning environments. However, they also reported persistent shortages of trained teachers and inadequate professional support services. The current study similarly identifies teacher training as a critical factor in implementing inclusive education policies. Although the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes teacher education reforms and professional development in inclusive pedagogy, practical challenges such as limited training opportunities and insufficient institutional support continue to affect implementation.

The findings also support the argument advanced by Hardy and Woodcock (2014), who suggested that broader policy environments can influence the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives. From a critical policy sociology perspective, they argue that market-oriented reforms and efficiency-driven educational systems may sometimes undermine inclusive values by prioritizing competition and performance metrics over equity and participation. While the present study does not directly examine neoliberal policy influences, the identified gaps between policy intentions and classroom practices suggest that systemic and structural factors continue to shape how inclusive education policies are implemented.

Furthermore, the study acknowledges the methodological challenges highlighted by D'Alessio and Watkins (2009) in comparing inclusive education policies across countries. Differences in definitions of inclusion, identification of special educational needs, and variations in national educational structures can complicate cross-national policy analysis. Despite these challenges, the present research demonstrates that certain foundational principles such as equity, participation, and respect for diversity remain consistent across global frameworks and national policies.

The results also reinforce the conclusions of Puja and Ahmad Dar (2021), who observed a growing emphasis on teacher training, equity, and support for disadvantaged learners across successive educational policies in India. Similarly, Devi (2022) highlighted that the National Education Policy 2020 aims to transform India's educational system by promoting equitable opportunities and inclusive practices. The present study supports these observations by demonstrating that NEP 2020 reflects global inclusive education principles while adapting them to national development priorities. However, it also confirms that the scale, diversity, and regional disparities within the Indian education system present significant challenges for implementation.

Overall, the discussion indicates that while global and national policies demonstrate strong conceptual alignment in promoting inclusive education, effective implementation requires sustained institutional support, adequate funding, and coordinated efforts among policymakers, educators, and communities. The findings underscore that inclusive education is not only a policy commitment but also a complex process requiring continuous adaptation to social, economic, and institutional contexts. Strengthening teacher capacity, improving infrastructure, enhancing monitoring mechanisms, and fostering community participation are therefore essential steps toward translating inclusive education policies into meaningful educational opportunities for all learners.

Conclusion

This study concludes that international and national policies on educational inclusion demonstrate strong alignment in their commitment to equity, access and social justice. International frameworks articulate a rights-based vision, whereas national policy adapts these principles to local contexts and development priorities. However, the findings indicate that policy coherence alone does not ensure effective practice. Implementation challenges particularly in teacher preparation, infrastructure, resource allocation, and monitoring continue to limit the realization of equitable learning opportunities. Consequently, meaningful inclusion requires sustained institutional commitment, adequate funding and active community participation to integrate all learners within a unified educational framework.

Recommendations of the Study

- i. Enhance teacher education and continuous professional development for inclusive pedagogy.
- ii. Develop stronger accountability and monitoring systems to track implementation outcomes.
- iii. Increase funding for accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and learning materials.
- iv. Strengthen coordination among government agencies, institutions, and communities.
- v. Promote awareness programs to foster supportive attitudes toward learner diversity.

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