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Policies, Assistive Technologies, and Barriers in Inclusive Education: A Global Systematic Review (2019-2024)

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Abstract

Inclusive education aims to guarantee the universal right to equitable and quality education, addressing the structural and contextual barriers that hinder its global implementation. Although educational policies and assistive technologies have facilitated some progress, challenges persist that impede the effective inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN). To critically analyze how educational policies, assistive technologies, and structural barriers interact in the implementation of inclusive education globally, identifying opportunities and limitations. A systematic literature review was conducted using PRISMA methodology, covering studies published between 2019 and 2024 in the Scopus database. Relevant empirical and theoretical research addresses the interrelations among policies, technologies, and structural barriers in inclusive educational contexts. The findings were grouped into three main categories.1. Assistive technologies, including agile methodologies, artificial intelligence, and educational robotics, have the potential to personalize learning and improve accessibility, albeit with ethical and practical challenges.2. Inclusive educational policies that demonstrate significant progress in some countries face issues of coherence and inequality in their implementation. 3. Structural barriers, such as limited teacher training, regional inequalities, and the coexistence of parallel educational systems, perpetuate exclusion. This study provides a comprehensive and updated view of the dynamics influencing inclusive education, highlighting the need for integrated strategies that combine assistive technologies and coherent policies. It also emphasizes the importance of an intersectoral collaborative approach for overcoming structural barriers and promoting educational equity. To advance toward an inclusive educational system, it is essential to design more equitable policies, ensure teacher training in assistive technologies, and establish regulatory frameworks that ensure ethical implementation. Additionally, fostering collaboration among governments, educational institutions, and technological actrs is recommended to address the structural barriers in diverse contexts.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Assistive Technologies; Educational Policies; Structural Barriers; Equity in Education

Introduction

All students, regardless of their differences, have the right to learn together in a shared educational setting, according to the theory behind inclusive education (Singh, 2024). From

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special education and civil rights movements, this idea has grown to encompass children from a variety of social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds in addition to those with disabilities. The significance of guaranteeing an inclusive educational system at all levels and throughout life is emphasized by the 2006 adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Growing worldwide awareness and a dedication to establishing more accessible and equitable learning settings for all students have led to a notable increase in research on inclusive education (Cohitmingao, 2024). Instead of being a peripheral idea, inclusive education—which aims to integrate all students regardless of their talents, disabilities, or special educational needs—has taken center stage in academic research agendas and educational policy (Singh 2024). A number of obstacles that still exist in pedagogical practices and governmental policies must be addressed in order to move toward an educational system that is truly inclusive. These obstacles include the coexistence of parallel educational systems that maintain segregation (Ainscow et al., 2016), a lack of financial and technological resources (UNESCO, 2020), and inadequate training for teachers (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Furthermore, the challenges of guaranteeing accessible and equitable education are made worse by geographical disparities and inconsistent implementation of inclusive educational policy. In this regard, assistive devices have become essential resources for getting over some of these obstacles.

From the use of agile methodologies and intelligent systems to implementing tools based on artificial intelligence (Akbarova et al., 2023), these technological solutions have the potential to personalize learning, improve accessibility, and foster active student participation. However, adopting these technologies also raises ethical and practical challenges such as data privacy (Mo & Mo, 2024), unequal access to resources (Mena et al., 2022), and the need for adequate training to ensure their effective use. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature: while numerous analyses on inclusive education exist, few focus on the dynamic interplay between inclusive educational policies, emerging assistive technologies (such as artificial intelligence and educational robotics), and persistent structural barriers. In addition, most studies tend to focus on specific contexts, leaving unexplored challenges and opportunities from a global perspective.
The present study differentiates itself from other reviews by:

1. Proposing an integrated approach that combines the review of policies, technologies, and structural barriers from a global perspective;
2. Incorporating emerging technologies such as agile methodologies, intelligent systems, and educational robotics, evaluating their potential impact and the ethical challenges they pose; and
3. Contextualizing the findings through relevant examples across different regions and educational levels.

In order to lay the groundwork for future research and the development of inclusive policies, the main goal is to critically examine the ways in which assistive technologies, educational policies, and structural barriers interact to implement inclusive education globally.

Methodology

Methodological Approach:

This study adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible approach throughout

all stages of the systematic review (Elsman et al., 2024). PRISMA was chosen as the methodological framework due to its widespread recognition in academic research and its effectiveness in structuring comprehensive and high-quality literature reviews.

To maintain methodological integrity, this systematic review strictly follows PRISMA guidelines, and the corresponding PRISMA checklist is provided as a supplementary file to ensure compliance with best practices in systematic reporting.

Information Sources:

The Scopus database was selected as the primary source due to its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications in inclusive education and its relevance for interdisciplinary studies that include emerging technologies and educational policies (Baas et al., 2020). This choice ensures access to high-quality literature relevant to the study's objectives.

Search Strategy:

A specific search strategy was designed to maximize the retrieval of relevant studies. The key terms used included:

- "inclusive education"
- "special education"
- "assistive technologies"
- "educational policies"
- "structural barriers"

These terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and adapted to Scopus' specific search format. Additionally, pilot tests were conducted to adjust the search strategy and ensure the relevance of the results.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

To delimit the scope of the analysis, the following criteria were defined:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Publications made between 2019 and 2024.
- Empirical or theoretical studies examining the interplay between educational policies, assistive technologies, and structural barriers in inclusive education.
- Articles written in English or Spanish.
- Peer-reviewed research.
- Documents with full text available.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies not explicitly focused on inclusive education or assistive technologies.
- Publications such as conference abstracts, editorial comments, or non-systematic reviews.

- Duplicated or irrelevant documents based on title and abstract.

Selection Procedure

The initial search identified 1,309 relevant studies. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, the sample was reduced to 126 articles. A thorough review of titles and abstracts resulted in the selection of 11 studies (Figure 1). Two independent researchers conducted this process to minimize bias and ensure the reliability of the study selection.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Relevant data from the selected studies were extracted using a standardized spreadsheet that included:

- Bibliographic data (author, year, title, source).
- Study objectives.
- Methodology used.
- Key findings related to policies, technologies, and structural barriers.
- Relevance to the objectives of this analysis.

The findings were grouped into three main categories: support technologies, inclusive educational policies, and structural barriers. This approach enabled a coherent and systematic synthesis of the information.

Justification for the Study Period

The time frame 2019–2024 was selected due to the rise of emerging technologies and advances in inclusive policies in recent years. This focus ensures that the findings reflect the most recent and relevant trends in the field of inclusive education.

Results

The initial search, conducted on December 23, 2024, identified 1,309 relevant documents. After applying the established inclusion and exclusion criteria, the sample was reduced to 126 documents. A comprehensive review of titles and abstracts resulted in the selection of 11 studies. This process followed a systematic and rigorous approach to ensure the reproducibility and reliability of the results (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The main findings were grouped into three thematic categories: support technologies, inclusive educational policies, and structural barriers.

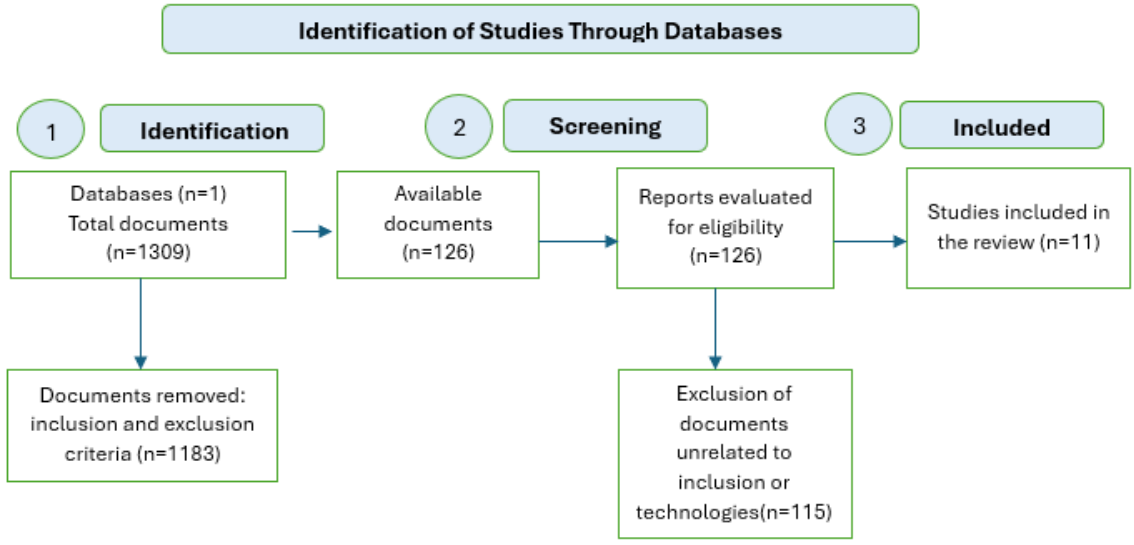

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram: study selection process

Support Technologies

The results underscore the crucial role of emerging technologies in promoting inclusive education, addressing specific barriers that limit the participation and learning of students with special educational needs (SEN). For instance, Muñoz-Arteaga et al. (2023) demonstrated how scrum-agile methodology, combined with digital technologies, enabled the customization of educational strategies for students with dyscalculia, significantly improving their fundamental math skills. This interdisciplinary approach involving teachers, psycho-pedagogues, and ICT specialists highlights the importance of collaboration in designing inclusive educational solutions.

Similarly, Akbarova et al. (2023) analyzed intelligent system technologies and highlighted three key pillars: machine learning, natural language processing, and computer vision. These tools not only optimize personalized learning, but also enhance accessibility, particularly for students with visual or linguistic disabilities. For example, AI-based adaptive learning systems allow for the real-time adjustment of educational content, promoting learning centered on individual needs.

Agrusti and Bonavolontà (2022) demonstrated the capacity of educational robotics to enhance technological, social, and motivational skills in students with SEN. Robotics not only fosters group interaction and critical thinking, but also generates enthusiasm and engagement in the learning process. However, the study identified a recurring barrier: insufficient teacher training on emerging technologies.

In addition, Mo and Mo (2024) analyzed an AI-based interactive speech recognition system specifically designed for students with hearing disabilities. The participants showed a significant reduction in semantic errors and an increase in task completion speed. This study exemplifies how AI technologies can transform access to education, although it raises ethical concerns such as data privacy and inequality in access.

Inclusive Educational Policies

The analysis of educational policies includes studies from diverse contexts, revealing both significant progress and persistent limitations. Buchner and Proyer (2020) identified three phases in Austria's transition towards inclusion, highlighting the shift from a parallel special education system to a more integrative model. However, the coexistence of dual educational systems and the influence of the medical model continue to limit their full inclusion.

In Ireland, Shevlin and Banks (2021) reported progress in the provision of resources and therapeutic support but also noted that the growth of special classes perpetuates exclusion by segregating students with SEN. This finding emphasizes the need for a holistic approach, such as that adopted in New Brunswick, Canada, in which inclusion is a priority.

A contrasting example is England, studied by Thomas et al. (2023), which showed how the increased use of specialized private schools not only raises costs, but also perpetuates structural inequalities and segregates students, hindering their social integration. This study advocates redirecting resources toward inclusive initiatives within the public system, fostering community-based educational models.

O'Leary et al. (2020) explored immersive workshops for STEM teachers designed to promote inclusive and culturally sensitive pedagogical practices. These workshops not only increased teachers' awareness of barriers, such as implicit biases and microaggressions, but also encouraged the implementation of innovative teaching strategies, improving classroom climate and educational equity.

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers have emerged as critical challenges in inclusive education. A recurring limitation identified in these studies was the lack of adequate teacher training. Flood and Banks (2021) noted that although Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has gained traction in Ireland, its implementation has been partial because of a lack of specialized training and conceptual confusion with approaches such as differentiation.

In Texas, DeMatthews and Knight (2019) documented how rigid policies, such as the 8.5% cap on identifying students with SEN, led to problematic practices including the manipulation of processes and reduced service provision. These policies disproportionately affect rural communities and districts with high poverty rates, exacerbating the existing inequalities.

Similarly, Schneider et al. (2022) highlighted that factors, such as psychiatric comorbidities, negatively impact the school adaptation of students with autism. Their study, based on the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) framework, suggested that comprehensive interventions combining educational, therapeutic, and technological approaches are essential to overcoming these barriers.

The reviewed studies consistently emphasized the need to address structural barriers through comprehensive strategies that combine coherent inclusive policies, accessible technologies, and adequate teacher training. This approach requires collaboration among governments, educational institutions, and technology stakeholders as well as the design of regulatory frameworks that promote equitable and ethical access to resources.

Discussion

The results of this analysis highlight the complex interplay between support technologies,

inclusive educational policies, and structural barriers in implementing inclusive education on a global scale. Although significant progress has been made in each of these areas, substantial challenges persist that require urgent attention and cross-sectoral solutions. These findings are discussed in detail below, integrating theoretical frameworks and previous studies to contextualize the results.

Support Technologies: Promises and Challenges

Emerging technologies, such as intelligent systems, educational robotics, and agile methodologies, have proven to be powerful tools for personalizing learning and enhancing accessibility. For instance, the study by Muñoz-Arteaga et al. (2023) on scrum-agile highlights the potential of these technologies to address the specific needs of students with dyscalculia, leading to significant improvements in math skills.

However, the implementation of these technologies is not limited by certain barriers. The lack of teacher training, as noted by Agrusti and Bonavolontà (2022), limits their effective use, whereas ethical concerns, as described by Mo and Mo (2024), underline the need to ensure equitable access and data privacy. This poses a critical challenge because without a solid regulatory framework, support technologies can exacerbate existing inequalities rather than reduce them.

However, the use of technologies such as machine learning and natural language processing, as discussed by Akbarova et al. (2023), opens new possibilities for real-time personalized education. These tools enable the adaptation of content and teaching strategies to meet the specific needs of each student, in alignment with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018). However, their effectiveness depends on the availability of technological resources and adequate teacher training, emphasizing the need for substantial investments in infrastructure and professional development.

Inclusive Educational Policies: Gaps between Design and Implementation

Despite advancements in inclusive educational policies, the reviewed studies highlight a persistent gap between design and effective implementation. For example, in Austria, Buchner and Proyer (2020) documented how the transition toward a more inclusive model has been hindered by the coexistence of parallel educational systems and the influence of the medical model, which perpetuates exclusion. This finding reinforces the need for a transformative approach such as the critical inclusion model proposed by Slee (2011), which challenges the hierarchies and structures that sustain segregation.

Similarly, in Ireland, Shevlin and Banks (2021) identified that, while policies have improved resource allocation, the growth of special classes remains a barrier to full inclusion. This phenomenon reflects the need to rethink educational systems from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989), considering how factors such as disability, gender, and ethnicity interact to generate educational inequalities.

In England, the analysis by Thomas et al. (2023) on reliance on specialized private schools illustrates how policies favoring such institutions perpetuate structural inequalities and segregate students with SEN. This finding underscores the importance of redirecting resources toward the public system and developing community-based models that promote inclusion from the ground-up.

Conversely, O'Leary et al. 's (2020) work on immersive workshops for STEM teachers

highlighted the effectiveness of training educators in inclusive and culturally sensitive practices. Although this approach did not directly measure student outcomes, its impact on the classroom climate and teacher attitudes suggests a promising model for addressing pedagogical barriers and fostering more inclusive environments.

Structural Barriers: Persistence and Complexity

Structural barriers remain among the greatest challenges in inclusive education. Studies such as Flood and Banks (2021) show that while UDL has been incorporated into curricular policies in Ireland, its implementation faces significant limitations due to a lack of teacher training and conceptual confusion. These barriers emphasize the need to strengthen training programs and ensure a clear understanding of inclusive approaches.

In Texas, DeMatthews and Knight (2019) highlighted how rigid metrics, such as the 8.5% cap on identifying students with SEN, had detrimental consequences for the most vulnerable students. This finding reflects a broader issue: the excessive reliance on quantitative indicators in policy formulation, which can shift the focus away from students' actual needs and toward meeting administrative targets.

Finally, the study by Schneider et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of considering contextual factors, such as psychiatric comorbidities, when designing inclusive interventions. Their use of the ICF framework provides a valuable tool for differentiating the developmental trajectories of students and designing more personalized and effective educational programs.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the need for a comprehensive approach that combines advanced technologies, coherent inclusive policies, and strategies to overcome structural barriers. To achieve true educational inclusion, it is essential to:

- **Invest in Teacher Training**: Educators must be trained in the use of emerging technologies and inclusive approaches such as UDL to ensure their effective implementation.
- **Strengthen Regulatory Frameworks**: Policies should be designed to guarantee equitable access to technologies and promote privacy and ethics in their use.
- **Promote Cross-Sectoral Collaboration**: Governments, educational institutions, technology stakeholders, and local communities must be involved in designing and implementing inclusive solutions.

Limitations

This study had some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the literature review was restricted to studies published between 2019 and 2024, which may have excluded relevant research published in earlier years. Additionally, focusing on a single database (Scopus) might limit the diversity of perspectives and approaches available from other academic sources. While the PRISMA methodology ensures a systematic and reproducible process, the interpretation of results could be influenced by the authors' inherent biases when analyzing and categorizing the selected studies.

Another significant limitation is the heterogeneity of the geographic and cultural contexts in the

included studies. Although a global perspective was sought, certain countries or regions may have been underrepresented, making it challenging to generalize the findings globally. Finally, reliance on secondary data limits our ability to conduct a deeper analysis of how policies, technologies, and structural barriers interact in specific contexts.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive overview of educational policies, support technologies, and structural barriers that influence the global implementation of inclusive education. Although significant progress has been achieved in the past decade, challenges persist that require urgent attention from governments, educational institutions, and technology stakeholders.

Among the most relevant findings is the need to design more coherent and equitable policies capable of bridging the gap between intention and effective implementation. Support technologies have emerged as essential tools for overcoming structural barriers and personalizing learning. However, their adoption must be accompanied by adequate teacher training and regulatory frameworks to ensure their ethical and equitable use.

Despite these opportunities, structural barriers remain a significant obstacle in inclusive education. These include inequalities in resource distribution, a lack of teacher training, and the coexistence of parallel educational systems. Overcoming these barriers requires a collective commitment that integrates efforts across sectors and considers the specificities of each context.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration and a holistic approach for advancing more effective and sustainable inclusive education. The findings presented here serve as a foundation for future research and development of strategies to promote equity and inclusion at all educational levels.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

An accurate PRISMA Research Guidelines Checklist has been included in the submission to ensure compliance with best practices for systematic reviews.

Supplementary Material

The supplementary file includes the PRISMA checklist, which provides a detailed account of the systematic review methodology followed in this study. This checklist ensures transparency and compliance with PRISMA guidelines.

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