

Specialised vs. Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities: A Global Comparative Analysis of Academic and Social Outcomes

Author: Seoyun Park

US International School

parksabrina1031@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In this report, a comprehensive comparison is presented between how inclusive and specialised education models affect social-emotional and academic outcomes for students with disabilities across diverse global contexts. Based on the empirical data taken from graduation and literacy metrics to peer interactions and well-being indicators, detailed information is provided about how the national policy framework, resource availability, and cultural norms shape student experiences. The findings showed that fully inclusive settings provide benefits to various students, particularly those with mild to moderate disabilities. Specialised placement is still important for learners with complex requirements. Hence, this paper proposes a flexible and tiered policy model that is linked with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). All these factors are used to reconcile contextual variations and promote equity. Some recommendations call for targeted investment in inclusive infrastructure, teacher preparation, and disaggregated research across disability types and regions.

Keywords: Specialised education, Inclusive education, Comparative Analysis, Disabilities, multi-tiered support, universal design for learning, social-emotional development, academic outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global debate based on the optimal educational placement for students with disabilities is linked with two primary models. The first one is inclusive education in which students with disabilities gain knowledge with non-disabled peers in specialised education, and mainstream classrooms in which instruction is tailored within dedicated disability-focused institutions (Carroll and Evangeleen Pattison). The supporters of inclusion argue that it fosters social integration, reduces stigma, and aligns with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities because its focus is on equal participation in education (García and Rentería). Secondly, proponents of specialised settings showed that these environments are providing a comprehensive support to individualised instruction, targeted support, and adaptive resources that can be highly challenging to deliver effectively in mainstream contexts (Ediyanto and Kawai).

Moreover, this debate contains huge implications for both social-emotional well-being and academic achievement. Globally, policy directions change widely, and countries like Canada and Italy have embraced inclusive education as a national standard, while others, including some parts of Japan and Germany, maintain parallel systems of specialized institutions (Ediyanto and Kawai). These policy choices are shaped by cultural attitudes and legal frameworks towards disability, availability of resources, and level of training. Overall, it is vital to understand these variations to develop evidence-based emotional strategies that can easily optimize outcomes for students with disabilities (Ediyanto and Kawai).

The purpose of this study is related to inclusive education, and it refers to the integration of students with disabilities into general education classrooms with necessary accommodations. However, specialized education implements learning in segregated programs or schools specifically designed for disabled students. All academic outcomes are measured through various indicators like standardised test performance, literacy rates, post-secondary enrolment, and graduation rates. Social-emotional development consisted of peer relationships, experiences of discrimination or bullying, resilience, and self-esteem (Clifford and Trey Miller).

To conduct this research, a cross-cultural comparative approach is used that examines both quantitative performance metrics and qualitative accounts for diverse contexts, through evaluating in detail how policy frameworks, cultural values, and resource

allocation have a huge influence on educational experience. Hence, the purpose is to show not only the trade-offs between these models but also potential hybrid approaches (Hettiaarachi and Mahishi Ranaweera).

1.1 Thesis Statement

Although no single model is reliable and universally guarantees superior outcomes. However, the interplay between specialised and inclusive education is mediated by resource, policy, and cultural contexts. Therefore, it suggests that a comprehensive, context-sensitive framework is reliable to use to better support both the social and academic development of students with disabilities around the globe.

2. HISTORICAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

The evolution of students struggling with disabilities shows shifting paradigms from institutionalisation and exclusion to rights-based inclusion and comprehensive policy frameworks (OECD). In the early 20th century, a lot of students struggling with disabilities were entirely removed from public education. For example, in the early 1970s in the US, only 20% of the students with disabilities were able to attend public schools (Shieldsfirm). At that time, special education services were extremely limited and only applicable to private or residential programs, which created other problems with uneven knowledge and uneven results in quality (GovFacts).

2.1 Foundational Legal Transformation in the Usa

It can be observed that a lot of pivotal court decisions in the early 1970s led towards legislative change. Based on the **PARC v. Pennsylvania (1972)**, the court gave orders that all children struggling with intellectual disabilities must be given free public programs of education that are linked to the learning capabilities of a child (Pubintlaw). It also established procedural safeguards like due process and parental input. Just after this, in **Mills v. Board of Education (1972)**, the court increased the rights for all children who struggled with disabilities by rejecting financial constraints as a justification for exclusion and obliging districts to provide individualised educational plans (IEPs) (3da.org).

Such legal momentum led towards the **1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142)**, guaranteeing Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), and it requires an Individualised Education Program (IEP by establishing the principles of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) by integrating into general education unless severity

increases in the future (Congress.gov). However, in 1972, the investigation showed that 8 million U.S children required special education, with 3.9 million students receiving proper education, and only 2.5 million received substandard support, and 1.75 million individuals failed to receive proper support in education (Loprest).

2.2 LEGISLATIVE REFINEMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

1986 (PL 99-457): In that era, the services were expanded by including early interventions for toddlers and infants born that year, and introduced some individualised Family Service Plans (IFSPs) (Kauffman and Dimitris Anastasiou).

1990 (IDEA): In that era, the Act's name was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and the eligibility level was enhanced by including traumatic brain injury and autism. Secondly, it included transition planning applied to post-school life for children (OECD).

1997 Amendments: These amendments increased focus on outcomes, mediation mechanisms, general curriculum access, and the “developmental delay” category for young children (Shieldsfirm).

2004 (IDEA): In this era, IDEA was aligned with NCLB, which mandated accountability and raised qualification and special educators with authorized three-year IEP cycles in various states (Yell and James G. Shriner).

Besides these changes, funding lagged significantly, too. The goal of Congress was to cover 40% of the extra pupil cost of special education in 2025. However, the contributions from the federal government were around 10% (roughly 1810 per student). Due to this, in 2017, the decision of the Supreme Court in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County* clarified further that IEPs must be calculated reasonably to enable the child to make progress appropriate to the circumstances of a child, which increases the bar beyond minimal advantages (Serr.disabilityrightsca).

2.3 Global Frameworks: From Salamanca to the CRPD

Globally, disability education evolved through concrete commitments worldwide.

Based on the Salamanca Statement in 1994, which was adopted by UNESCO, championed inclusive education, and ordered nations to follow the rights of all children by providing them

equal rights in education and regular schools. Also, provide them with community-based support with specialised partnerships for the future (Yell and James

G. Shriner).

Secondly, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) mentions a huge shift towards disability as a main reason for rights rather than charity (Un.org). This was signed by 164 countries, and then ratified by 192 countries, but it imposed obligations to ensure full inclusion in societal and educational participation.

2.4 Global Variance: Implementation Across Contexts

CRPD's implementation is not the same around the world because in Australia, in 2009, approximately. Two hundred ninety-two thousand six hundred children with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream schools. From them, 9.1% in primary schools and only 7.4% in secondary schools (Abs.gov). At the same time, only two-thirds of students have severe or core-activated limitations. Overall, the academic outcomes were improved rapidly when inclusive practices were well-supported.

In 1997, reforms in Sri Lanka expanded teacher training and curricula, but in 2000, only a minority of students were able to access special education, in which 59.5% of boys vs. 40.5% of girls (Hettiaarachi and Mahishi Ranaweera). After 1979, China's reforms started, and a national survey counted 8.17 million school-aged children with disabilities. Secondly, their term "sui ban jiu du," which is known as learning in a regular classroom, reflects an incremental shift towards inclusion by handling various challenges in teacher and resource capacity (Liu and Su).

3. ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

The required academic outcomes for students with disabilities were not the same across education models, national contexts, and disability types.

3.1 Literacy and Numeracy in Early Education

Such students with disabilities around the globe face stark disparities in foundational skills. They are 42% less likely to gain basic numeracy and literacy compared with peers without disabilities. Overall, this gap is more pronounced in low-resource settings (Global Disability Summit). For instance, there is a lack of mainstream resources present in Fiji, and it means students with intellectual disabilities are showing better learning outcomes in specialised settings rather than under unsupported inclusive classrooms.

3.2 Graduation Rates & Educational Attainment

In the USA, graduation outcomes are based on the

disability type. From the 2021 to 2022 academic year, more than 72% autistic students graduated with a regular diploma, and 80% of students with specific learning disabilities graduated too. However, in higher education, some disparity is still present because only 21% of adults were able to gain a bachelor's degree with disabilities, compared with 39% of the general adult population, which shows a gap of 18% points (Naz and Zahid Majeed).

At the institutional level, higher education completion is also different because only 41% of students with disabilities were able to complete their degrees within 8 years compared with 52% without disability. Furthermore, in 2019, only 11% of disabled students were able to gain undergraduate enrolments, and they consisted of only 6% of bachelor's degree recipients, which shows a clear attainment gap (Carroll and Evangeleen Pattison).

3.3 Higher Education Access and Enrolment Trends

The enrolment level of students with disabilities in tertiary education has increased significantly. For example, 11.1% of undergraduates in the USA identified as having disability in 2011-12, and it increased to 19.4% by 2015 and 16 (Kauffman and Dimitris Anastasiou). On the other hand, undergraduate disability enrolment level was increased in Australia by 123% between 2008 and 2017 (Kauffman and Dimitris Anastasiou). Moreover, in England, such students with disabilities have an increased enrolment rate by 36% between 2014 and 2019 (Kauffman and Dimitris Anastasiou).

Besides these progresses in higher-income countries, some underdeveloped countries faced various difficulties. In these 35 countries, university completion for students with disabilities only increased by 4.5% vs. 7.9% for nondisabled students (Clifford and Trey Miller).

This disability representation was nearly doubled at Oxford University, and it was increased from 9.5% to 19% of admitted students from 2019 to 2023 (Clifford and Trey Miller).

Moreover, the data gained from higher education showed that the distribution of disabilities is not the same regionally. The reason behind it is that in 2003, Chronic disorders in the UK were most common, 46.6% and it was followed by dyslexia, 15.6% and sensory impairments, 9.1% (Kauffman and Dimitris Anastasiou). Also, in Germany, 81.2% of students with disabilities faced chronic organic disorders 52% faced respiratory or other allergies, 17% musculoskeletal disorders, dyslexia affected 6.3% and 8%

psychological disorders (Kauffman and Dimitris Anastasiou). Whereas in France, 23.4% faced health disorders, 28.1% had sensory impairments, and 22.6% had motor impairments. Lastly, in Canada, learning disabilities are linked with 47.9% of SWD enrolments (Kauffman and Dimitris Anastasiou).

3.4 Specialised Programs for Intellectual Disability (ID) in the USA

In the USA, graduation outcomes are based on the disability type. From the 2021 to 2022 academic year, more than 72% autistic students graduated with a regular diploma, and 80% of students with specific learning

Globally, postsecondary programs for students struggling with intellectual disabilities have expanded through targeted models and funding. According to this, more than 6000 students with intellectual disabilities (ID) were enrolled across 310 colleges and universities in the USA. Moreover, federal investment in demonstration programs has exceeded US\$100 million and enabled inclusive PSE experiences that have a huge impact on independent living, employment, and life satisfaction level (Grigal and Lyman L. Dukes III). From the comparative outcome survey, it can be noted that students with ID in PSE have experienced powerful outcomes: 73% have exercised recently, with 37% in the non-PSE group (Grigal and Lyman L. Dukes III). From them, 83% had friendships with other students that helped them to provide good knowledge and education without hurting their feelings about disabilities (Grigal and Lyman L. Dukes III).

3.5 Country and Regional Variance

From 1987 to 1996, the enrollment rate of students with disabilities increased from 6% to 60% in China, mostly in general classrooms. However, only 60 to 70% children were able to attend schools, and just 25% enrolled in high schools or higher institutions. However, China has a low percentage that requires special education, with 5% compared with the USA (10%) (Deng and Zhu). For Eswatini, the 2017 data mentioned that 52% of disabled individuals were unable to gain an education from schooling. Secondly, only 23.3% reached a primary certificate, with 9.3% to junior certification (Hendry Sawe). A total of primary-aged learners is only 41,564, with a huge share of 15 to 21-year-olds because of repetition and late entry. All these tertiary institutions are inclusive by policy, and teachers have developed skills in students so they can easily complete any education program (Hendry Sawe).

Also, in South Africa, university degree attainment

among disabled students increased from

0.3 to 1% from 2002 to 2014. Further, 52% disabled students in Zimbabwe failed to gain access to education (McKenzie and Hanass-Hancock). Also, some gender discrepancies are present because 34% women and 22% men were unable to get an education with disabilities (McKenzie and Hanass-Hancock). However, an inclusive policy exists without structural and attitudinal rules. Finally, in Tanzania, only 9% deaf learners were gaining education with a huge repetition rate. Only three universities in this country were providing services to deaf students (Hendry Sawe).

4. SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES

There is a need for a balanced look at peer relationships for understanding the social-emotional trajectories of students with disabilities.

4.1 Peer Relationships and Inclusion Dynamics

Inclusive education fosters meaningful peer relationships for disabled students, though accessibility varies. Strong peer connections improve social outcomes, but not all students equally experience these opportunities. The role of inclusive education is vital because it increases peer connections. Some research mentioned that some students with disabilities in an integrated preschool setting have gained success in social skills. However, those linked with segregated environments were underscoring the benefits of inclusive contexts. The next study mentioned that implementing a peer intervention strategy for students with autism can be achieved by giving training to peers (Chang and Locke). Therefore, they help them to stay on task and significantly decrease off-task behaviour and enhance peer acceptance (Chang and Locke).

According to a large-scale study conducted in Saudi Arabia, the study found that taking cohorts of students before and after SEN policy reforms showed that improving resources and inclusive protocols. Hence, it had a small negative impact on non-SEN students from having peers with SENS in their class disappear. It means that well-resourced inclusion can be positive and neutral for all involved (García and Rentería).

4.2 Bullying and Victimization

Bullying always remains a huge concern. The data obtained from Meta-analysis revealed that students with high disabilities, like neurological, physical, and sensory, were disproportionately targeted for both cyberbullying and positive bullying relative to peers without any disability (Ručman and Šulc). For example, students with learning disabilities or autism

are notably highly prone to victimisation compared with students with fewer disabilities (Ručman and Šulc).

This evidence links Bullying with poor psychological outcomes. Hence, the survey mentioned 95,545 students in Sichuan, China, and the result showed more than 70% reported bullying problems (Zhao and Shenglong Yang). Due to this mild bullying, students were suffering from behavioural or emotional problems, poor sleep, PTSD, depression, and anxiety, with internet addiction. However, severe bullying increased this risk ratio by 18 times (Zhao and Shenglong Yang).

5. EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND SCHOOL BELONGING

The role of supportive school climate is extremely vital in emotional resilience. The research conducted by Deng and Zhu mentioned that such classrooms with a safe and fair environment, occupied with disciplinary systems and a supportive teacher-student relationship, had never faced any kind of depression, anxiety, or loneliness (Deng and Zhu).

Secondly, feelings of belonging also increase academic outcomes and mental health. Some social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are also helpful because they minimise bullying and aggression and are linked with an 11th percentile boost in academic performance (Matthew A. Spelker). Early adoption of SEL is linked with minimised societal risks, including a lower likelihood of juvenile justice involvement with dependence on adulthood and public housing (Matthew A. Spelker).

6. TEACHER AND PEER ATTITUDES

The attitude of the teacher critically influences social-emotional outcomes. In different contexts, from Saudi Arabia to global studies, such teachers who gained training in inclusive education showed significantly positive results towards inclusion, but such reports with higher stress levels led to less receptive results (Carroll and Evangeleen Pattison). From the Indonesian study, the SACIE-R instrument was used by teachers, and they found a mean attitude score of 3, which indicates moderate positivity among elementary teachers (Ediyanto and Kawai). However, these results mentioned some concerns regarding a lack of skills for teaching students who require communicative technology like sign language and Braille (Deng and Zhu).

7. CLASSROOM DESIGN AND SUPPORT SERVICES

For classrooms, pedagogical and physical design

matters. Tailored classrooms and small classroom sizes adaptation often led towards high inclusivity. Hence, studies mentioned that by enhancing teaching methods by incorporating multi-sensory and interactive strategies, and providing students with high support from specialists, then ameliorate inclusion outcomes were gained (Carroll and Evangeleen Pattison).

8. CULTURAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

There is a need for a balanced look at peer relationships for understanding the social-emotional trajectories of students with disabilities.

Societal expectations, stigma, and local beliefs are profoundly shaping the prospects of inclusive education in developing countries. Around the globe, more than 1 billion people live with disabilities, and only 80% live in low-and middle-income countries (Shami and Nashwan). In various contexts, disability is stigmatised because most families may be shunned, and children are often marginalised according to entrenched misconceptions (Shami and Nashwan). For example, some communities in Kenya believe that disability arises from witchcraft, moral failings, and curses that lead towards denial of school access, particularly for girls and huge rates of abandonment by fathers (García and Rentería). However, pervasive beliefs in Ghana related to the possession of evil spirits and other factors lead to less investment in education and widespread exclusion.

Some vital steps were taken to minimise stigma through community-based interventions, as educational events observed a comprehensive improvement in attitudes towards children with disabilities, even if stigma remained unchanged (Hepperlen and Jennifer Biggs). Therefore, it suggests that an incremental cultural shift can start with awareness. The problem is that a lot of LMICs lack detailed anti-stigma research and policy action, especially when compared with high-income countries (Hepperlen and Jennifer Biggs). However, resource disparities are exacerbating these cultural barriers because high-income countries generally invest in inclusive infrastructure, teacher training, and awareness programs. On the other hand, low-income countries faced systematic challenges like a lack of legislation, limited funding, and poor teacher preparedness. From the WHO and World Bank report, it can be observed that 80% of people with disabilities are living in low-income countries in which discrimination, dropout rates, and elevated vulnerability are prevalent (Organisation).

Also, in affluent nations, cultural norms are shaping disability inclusion. For example, social welfare in

Singapore focuses on family support and self-reliance, and the government has launched awareness campaigns with allocated substantial funds like SGD 400 million. All these factors are present within individual responsibility and heavily depend on grassroots organisations (Clifford and Trey Miller).

9. COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

In this section, there is detailed information regarding comparative snapshots across four national models that include Jordan, Finland, the United States, and China for identifying hybrid systems, unique approaches, and patterns.

9.1 Finland (Nordic Model)

This country shows highly inclusive systems, with less than 2% of students with disabilities attending special schools. However, almost all students, more than 30% are receiving some form of support during their first 9 years in school (Clifford and Trey Miller). Furthermore, the Finnish educational system is also unique, and it adapts teaching to meet the required needs rather than segregating learners. This approach is beneficial because it fosters social cohesion with equal participation of individuals, which often leads to better results, including minimised hate crimes and mental health issues (Carroll and Evangeleen Pattison).

9.2 United States of America (Inclusive + Hybrid Choice Reforms)

This country is moving towards high advancement with student-centred special educational and flexible programs. In 2025, the Department of Education is reforming its program to enhance personalised learning, school choices, and accessibility while protecting civil rights. The US government also features a hybrid of specialised and inclusive models (Nima Taheri Hosseinkhani). Due to this, general education inclusion under IDEA coexists with highly specialised programs linked with specific disabilities by providing families with various options based on their demand (Carroll and Evangeleen Pattison).

9.3 Jordan

The educational system of Jordan offers three frameworks that include partial inclusion, full inclusion, and attached special classrooms. Its implementation started in earnest after Law No. 20 (2017) and the 2020 to 2030 inclusive Education Strategy (Hettiaarachi and Mahishi Ranaweera). In 2019, more than 150 students with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream public schools with accommodations. This country also allows a hybrid setup that allows challenges, and tailored placement like coordination problems, negative community attitudes, limited data on outcomes, and inconsistent

funding (Hettiarachi and Mahishi Ranaweera).

9.4 China (Scale-Driven Hybrid Shift)

This country is moving towards high advancement with student-centred special educational and flexible programs. In 2025, the Department of Education is

For students struggling with disability in China, a rapidly evolving hybrid model. Besides this, only 5% of school-aged children require special education compared with 10% in the USA (Hettiarachi and Mahishi Ranaweera). However, the system had made various changes between 1987 and 1996 by increasing entry test rates for disabled students from 6% to 60% largely within general classrooms (Hettiaarachi and Mahishi Ranaweera). However, chronic under-enrolment remains, and results show that only 60 to 70% disabled students are able to attend school, with only 25% attending high school or higher education. China is also working on expanding teacher education programs for the future, which shows its future capacity for broader inclusion (McKenzie and Hanass-Hancock).

In Finland, Nordic systems are prioritising universal inclusion by adapting systems rather than individuals. Also, mixed models used in Jordan, the US, and China are offering flexibility, and blending inclusion with specialised support by enabling parental choice and tailored placement. In China, rapid expansion has been observed with uneven outcomes because, in this country, inclusion grows but educational equity lags, so they introduced a hybrid model for disabled students (Clifford and Trey Miller).

10. CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the global comparative analysis has explained that specialised and inclusive educational models for students struggling with disabilities yield differing academic and social-emotional outcomes based on national contexts, systemic resources, and disability types. In inclusive settings, gains achieved in graduation rates, literacy, and social integration, and their benefits are uneven because they are highly affected by teacher preparedness, cultural readiness, and infrastructure. Specialised programs were introduced for students with profound sensory or intellectual disabilities, and they can offer highly tailored support when built into integrated systems to ensure meaningful engagement even when full inclusion may not be feasible.

Overall, this review reaffirms that no one-size-fits-all solution exists. Its full inclusion is considered ideal in principle but falls short in contexts lacking pedagogical capacity or cultural support. On the other side, segregated systems can perpetuate marginalisation

when divorced from inclusive philosophies. However, a proper promising path is present in the tiered, flexible global policy model, structured around Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), as universal design ensures accessible learning for all students. Secondly, Targeted supports (Tier 2) resolve group-level requirements, and individualised services (Tier 3) offer intensive interventions aligned perfectly with specialised settings or students' IEPs that require frameworks like PBIS and SWIFT.

To implement this model, there is a need for high investment in data systems, teacher training, and inclusive school cultures. Moreover, it respects cultural variations by offering adaptable pathways, whether in resource-rich or constrained environments.

Future research must consider disaggregated studies and longitudinal research across disability categories and income settings. A detailed evaluation of tiered models, like scalability, efficacy, and cost-effectiveness, is important. Also, exploring intersections like ethnicity, gender, and rural-urban disparities can easily refine policy precision. Through designing inclusive systems properly with equity and flexibility at the core, it is simple for stakeholders to move closer to the shared goal of ensuring social-emotional and academic flourishing for all students with disabilities.

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