

# Special Education and Inclusion Policies in Different Cultural Contexts

Qi Duan <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *National Institutes of Health, USA. E-mail: duanqi@gmail.com*

---

## Abstract

The current paper looks into the impact of cultural aspects in designing, implementing, and success of the policies concerning special education and inclusion. Globally, the inclusion policy is the one followed in most countries due to global policies, for example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). However, each country implements the policy in its own way. The current paper uses a mixed method for analyzing the issue at hand: case studies, policy analysis, and surveys and interviews were conducted. The aim is to look at the role and effect of some cultural aspects, such as society's attitude toward persons with disabilities, family structure, and historical views on disability, in the effectiveness of the policy in question. It was found that inclusion was successful in cultures with high collectivism and specific structural support, namely Scandinavia and select East Asian contexts like Japan, while in other regions, even with inclusion policies in place, barriers persist. In conclusion, this paper stresses the significance of implementing culturally sound policies and practices that conform to cultural values in order to achieve the success of inclusion. In addition, the study indicates the necessity to eliminate the cultural stigmatization, train teachers on how to conduct an inclusive education environment and allocate necessary resources for teachers.

**Keywords:** Special Education, Inclusion Policies, Cultural Contexts, Disability, Education Systems, Stigma, Policy Implementation.

---

## **Introduction**

Policies relating to inclusion and special education are critical for ensuring equal access to education for all students. Inclusion policies and programs ensure that children with special needs or difficulties participate in the general education process, thus fostering inclusion and connectedness among all students. However, these policies and programs vary from one culture to another. The cultural aspects such as the values and beliefs determine the definition of inclusion. For example, there are cultures which prioritize inclusiveness while others have cultural backgrounds that may limit the process of inclusion of persons with special needs.

The implementation of special education and inclusion policies in culturally diverse countries may be complicated by cultural differences in perspectives on disability, inclusion, and education (Reindal, 2010; Davies, 2018). The culture plays a critical role in shaping perceptions towards special education that can make its implementation difficult (Friend et al., 2010). This could result in exclusion, marginalization, and poor-quality education for children with special educational needs Artiles et al., (2010). In order to tackle these problems, there is need to comprehend the link between culture and policy.

In this paper, the intention is to explore the influence of culture in special education and inclusion policies. The objective of this study is to comprehend the functions of culture in special education and inclusion policy making, implementation and success in order to understand how culture-sensitive policies can enhance the effectiveness of special education programs around the world.

## **Research Questions**

- What are the most important cultural influencing factors in designing and implementing special education and inclusion policies in various regions?
- What are the implications of these policies on the marginalised in different cultural settings, including the disabled in schools?
- What are the challenges and opportunities of encouraging inclusion in school systems that have different cultural values and beliefs?

The paper assesses these elements using a variety of regional prisms such as the rights-based systems of Scandinavia, the emerging systems in Jordan and India, and the solidarity-oriented systems found in South American situations such as Brazil.

The organization of the paper will be as follows: Section I: Introduction discusses the importance of special education policies and inclusion, cultural challenges that arise and the objectives of the research along with research questions. Section II: Literature Review outlines a global review of special education policies, the cultural factors associated with the policies and the issues that arise with respect to different cultures, and comparison of policies of inclusion in different regions. Section III: Methodology describes the methodology employed for conducting the research, along with data gathering and analysis. Section IV: Findings are the results of the comparative analysis of inclusion policies that address the effect of cultural factors and give case studies of different countries. Section V: Discussion: The discussion section views the results with reference to the existing literature, provides policy implications, and explains the challenges in the policy implementation in different cultural settings. Lastly, Section VI: Conclusion recapsulates the main discoveries, gives helpful tips and hints as to where the research can be continued, where it is important to focus on the inclusive education of all students without any references to their cultural backgrounds.

## **Literature Review**

### **Global Overview of Special Education and Inclusion**

The policies of special education and inclusion have been changing considerably in the last several decades, as models of education based on segregation give place to methods of mainstreaming education (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013; Pantić & Florian, 2015). It is now globally trending to ensure that children with disabilities are included in the general education environment as much as possible in accordance with international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD). At the onset, special education was perceived as distinct, with a focus on providing special education to children with disabilities in isolated settings. Inclusion policies have, however, since become more conspicuous, centring on the adjustment of the general education system to meet the needs of all the students, including those with special needs. The increased appreciation of the rights of people with disabilities and the role of social integration has helped bring about this paradigm shift. Nations have come up with different

forms of inclusion that can be full inclusion to more specific forms of inclusion, wherein the students with special needs are integrated during the day (Strogilos & Avramidis, 2017; Francisco et al., 2020).

### **Cultural Influences on Policy**

The cultural rules and practices are quite influential in determining the policy of special education. In other cultures, the culture is firmly held to the belief of keeping the traditional roles of individuals with disabilities, which sometimes results in exclusion or segregation. Other cultures, on the other hand, might value community responsibility and collective belonging and promote more inclusive politics. As an example, in most Western countries, there is an emphasis on personal rights and equal opportunities, and this has resulted in inclusive education systems. Nevertheless, in certain Eastern societies, resistance might be evident because of stigmatisation or misunderstandings about disability. Such cultural differences have an immense influence on the policy formulation process as well as the success of the policies in enhancing real inclusion (Brown et al., 2019; Francisco et al., 2020; Stangvik, 2010)

### **Challenges in Cultural Contexts**

Even though the world has started to embrace inclusive education, there are still serious challenges that are faced, especially in multi-cultural settings. These problems are: the stigma of disability in society, lack of awareness, lack of training of teachers, and inadequate resources to assist students with disabilities. In other cultures, the attitudes towards disability can lead to a situation in which children with disabilities are kept at home instead of attending school. Also, the existing systemic barriers, e.g., language barriers, poorly funded educational systems, and the absence of special support services, also contribute to hindering the introduction of effective inclusive education policies. Such dilemmas are heightened in low-resource contexts, where inclusive education is largely viewed as an unrealistic ideal, as opposed to a real possibility (Benson, 2023; Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015).

### **Comparative Analysis**

There is a wide disparity in the introduction of inclusive education policies within regions and cultures (Armstrong et al., 2011; Miles & Singal, 2010; Moriña, 2019). An example is that Scandinavian nations such as Sweden and Finland have been the first to embrace inclusive education, emphasizing individualized instruction of students with special needs in a regular education classroom (Savolainen et al., 2012; Sharma et al., 2012; Florian, 2019). The countries have also incorporated teacher professional development programs in an effort to make sure that the teachers are prepared to teach students of varied populations. Conversely, African and some Asian third-world countries have distinct issues, such as inadequate infrastructure, educational issues, and cultural stigmatization of disabilities. In some nations, such as Jordan, special education teachers have brought out the conflict between the culture and the actual enforcement of the policy of inclusive education, which has created a lack of connection between policy and practice. Likewise, in South America, Brazil has developed a solid legal framework to include based on social justice and solidarity. Though the success and family participation in urban centers are high, the system still experiences uneven distribution of resources in rural provinces, just like the rest of the developing world. Comparative study of these areas indicates that though the policy frameworks may be identical on paper, the cultural attitudes and resources are important factors to consider whether inclusion policies will be successful (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Wang & Lam, 2017).

As the literature shows, the development of the special education and inclusion policies has been largely influenced by cultural contexts and this affects the manner in which these policies are formulated and practiced. Although in certain areas, a significant amount of progress has been achieved in terms of including students with disabilities into mainstream education, other areas continue to struggle with cultural stigma, resource insufficiency, and insufficient teacher education. Comparative studies indicate that effective inclusion policies tend to be an outcome of positive cultural disposition, resourced systems and sustained professional growth of educators. But in places where culture is resistant or there is a lack of resources, inclusive education is still a major challenge and it needs to be approached differently to overcome the cultural and structural barriers.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to give a detailed explanation of special education and inclusion policies in various cultural settings. The qualitative component aimed to collect the deep insights on the basis of the case studies and the interviews with the main stakeholders, whereas the quantitative one will presuppose the statistical analysis of the data of policy implementation and results. This mixed method will make it possible to triangulate the data, and explore the questions of the research more comprehensively and carefully.

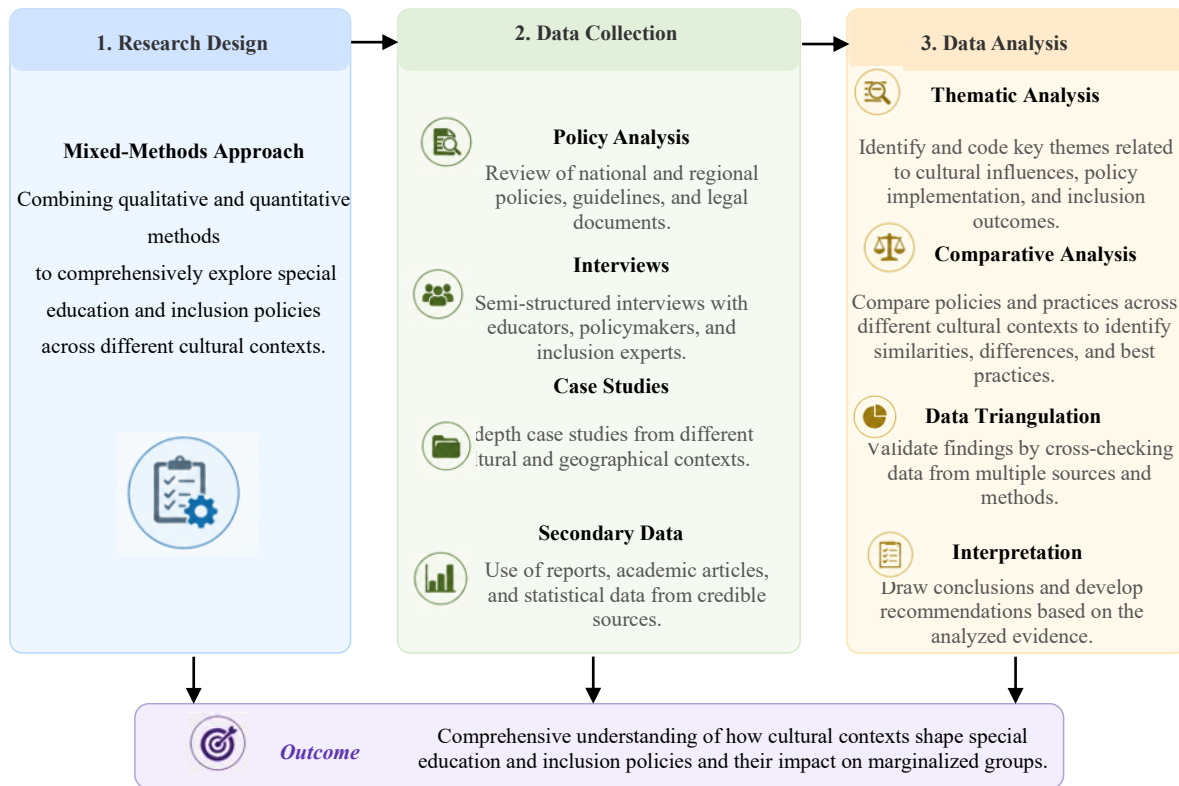


**Fig. 1: Research Methodology Flowchart: A Mixed-Methods Approach to Analyzing Special Education and Inclusion Policies**

Fig. 1 provides the chronological procedures of the research methodology, starting with data collection, which will be based on case studies, policy analysis, interviews, and surveys. It followed by the qualitative analysis step (thematic coding and comparative analysis) and the quantitative analysis step (descriptive statistics and inferential tests). The combination of qualitative and quantitative data in a visual way (see fig. 1) illustrates the degree to which the study of the influence of cultural contexts on special education and inclusion policies is holistic.

### Data Collection

The sources of data used in this study will be a number of sources to have a wide and varied view. The case studies will be carried out in countries or regions that have different cultural backgrounds to understand how inclusion policies are carried out in the real world. The policy analysis will be conducted regarding national and regional policies regarding inclusion, their main strategies, challenges, and their results. Interviews will be conducted with policymakers, teachers, and special educators from different cultures to get their perspectives regarding the effectiveness and problems of inclusion policies. In addition, survey data were collected from additional teachers and other individuals to determine their inclinations toward inclusion and its influence on inclusion in different cultures.

### Data Analysis

In this case, thematic coding is going to be employed in analyzing the qualitative data from the case studies and interviews that will identify recurring themes, difficulties, and successful strategies in implementing the inclusion policies. A comparative analysis will then be used in analyzing the similarities and differences among policies in the various cultures, while emphasizing the role of culture in the process. As for the quantitative data analysis, descriptive statistics are going to be employed in identifying the main issues in the data set, while further inferential statistics analysis (chi square and ANOVA) will be employed in identifying any relationships between culture and inclusion policies.

## Findings

### Policy Landscape Across Cultures

Indeed, comparative research into special education and inclusion policies reveals a heterogeneous set of approaches determined by cultural values, education traditions, and previous approaches to disabled people. Policies of inclusion in Western societies, namely those in Europe and North America, tend to be viewed from the standpoint of the approach based on the rights of the participants of the educational process. Such nations are likely to have a well-developed framework and support system facilitating the incorporation of students with disabilities into general education. Conversely, in Asian countries, and some in Africa, there are more diversified strategies, with inclusion constrained by resources, cultural taboos, or prioritizing segregated education. Whereas in some places, there has been progress in the introduction of inclusive policies, some others are challenged significantly because of social attitudes towards disabilities and hence cannot be effectively integrated into mainstream education.

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Special Education and Inclusion Policies Across Different Cultural Contexts**

| Country | Cultural Context                    | Inclusion Policy Focus                                              | Key Challenges                                                  | Successes                                                |
|---------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Finland | Collective, equality-focused        | Rights-based, individualized support for students with disabilities | Limited resources in rural areas                                | High integration rates, strong teacher collaboration     |
| India   | Family-oriented, hierarchical       | Legislative inclusion, but variable implementation                  | Cultural stigma, lack of teacher training, resource disparities | Urban successes, new policies improving accessibility    |
| Jordan  | Community-centric, family-focused   | Inclusion policies are nascent, with mixed urban/rural outcomes     | Resistance from communities, lack of professional development   | Slow progress in urban centers, government support       |
| Brazil  | Solidarity, social justice-oriented | Strong legal framework for inclusion, focus on urban areas          | Resource limitations in rural areas, teacher preparation gaps   | High success in urban schools, strong family involvement |

Table 1 encapsulates the main areas of differences and similarities in the application of the special education and inclusion policies in various countries. It brings out the cultural, policy, and resource-related aspects that determine the success of inclusion initiatives. Included to the table are also particular problems and achievements in each nation giving a clear comparison of the influence of cultural contexts on the inclusion policies.

### Impact of Cultural Factors

Inclusion policies are influenced by cultural factors which are a determining factor in the success or failure of inclusion. The application of the inclusive education in the collectivist society where the support of the family and community are the priorities is often dependent on the communal attitude to the people with disabilities. As an illustration, in Japan the idea of universal education fits into the cultural ideas of harmony and integration, which is why inclusion programs have been successful in some areas. Nonetheless, in more individualistic societies, emphasis might be placed more on individual rights and legal regulations, which may either facilitate or limit the complete inclusion of students with disabilities depending on the strength of the law and the disposition of society. Also, how inclusive education policies are perceived and implemented depends on the level of awareness and acceptance of disabilities in society. The high stigma in countries like in parts of the Middle East tends to make it hard to overcome the social obstacles against inclusion, even with supportive educational policies in theory.

As fig. 2 shows, the effectiveness of inclusion policies in different countries is related to various cultural factors (e.g., societal attitudes, community support, family involvement). It presents the visualization of the impact of cultural values on the success of inclusion, and each country is presented in the x-axis, and the effectiveness in the y-axis. This will assist in putting into focus the key cultural factors that dictate the effectiveness of policies of inclusion within the various environments.

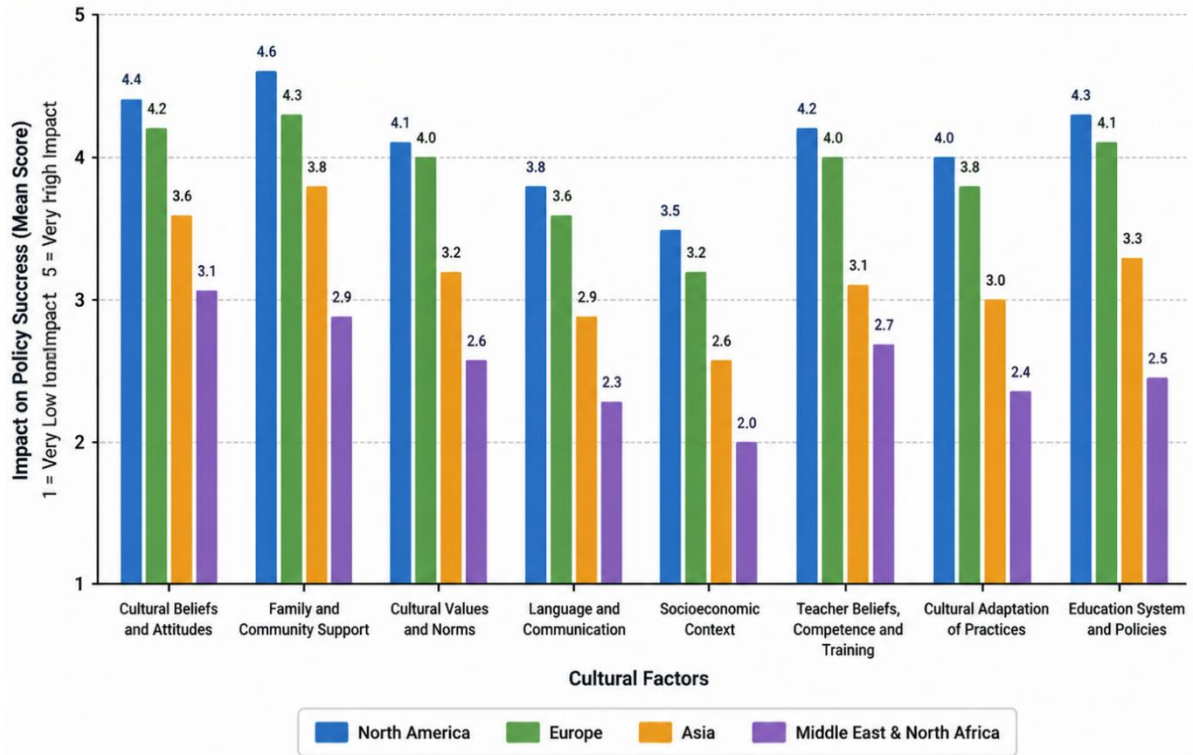


**Fig. 2: Impact of Cultural Factors on the Success of Special Education and Inclusion Policies**

## Discussion

### Interpretation of Results

The results of this study indicate that there are great differences in the effectiveness of special education and inclusion policies in various cultural settings. Those countries which stress on collective values and community support like those in Scandinavian regions display greater success rates in the integration of students with disabilities into the general education. This is consistent with other sources of literature that propose that cultural perceptions of disability, including the assumption of equal opportunities among all, are key in determining the effectiveness of inclusion activities (Strogilos and Avramidis, 2017). On the other hand, those areas with strong stigmas or traditional attitudes towards disability like some regions in the Middle East and South Asia have a more difficult time in enacting inclusive policies. In other words, the findings suggest the hypothesis that the inclusion policies cannot be viewed in isolation but rather have to consider cultural context, societal values, and the historical background to succeed Brown et al., (2019). Thus, the outcomes contribute to the broader conversation about the nature of the inclusion process as complex and multifaceted and inherently tied to culture.

### Policy Implications

The results highlight the importance of inclusion policies that are culturally responsive. In areas where inclusion is not doing well like in some parts of Asia and Africa, the reforms of policy should focus on raising awareness levels in society and addressing stigma of disabilities. Also, policymakers need to resolve the resource imbalances within these areas such as insufficient teacher training and access to support services. It is also proposed in the results that policy frameworks must be adaptable to suit the local cultural values, but retain a focus on equality and participation of students with disabilities. Successful countries such as Finland should act as role models to other regions but the policies need to be adjusted to the local problems and issues. Professional development programs should also be more comprehensive and integrated into the future policies of teachers to make them well prepared to accommodate the needs of the students who have different needs and learn in inclusive classes.

### Challenges in Policy Implementation

Introduction of inclusive education policies is fraught with several challenges especially in multicultural settings. A major challenge that has been encountered is the cultural resistance to the notion of inclusion of children with

disabilities into mainstream education. The disability is considered a social stigma in most cultures, which preconditions the unwillingness to embrace the inclusive practices by families and communities (Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015). The second obstacle is the resource deficiency which can be in the form of lack of finances, lack of infrastructure and shortage of trained special education teachers. It is also commonly found in low-income countries where educational resources are under a strain. Also, there are political and economic conditions, which tend to make such difficulties worse, including unstable government or poor policies. The study underscores the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to inclusion, which considers the social perception and structural obstacles. To address these obstacles, the governments need to collaborate with the NGOs, educators, and families to develop an inclusive learning environment that respects and embraces diversity.

## **Conclusion**

The study shows that cultural contexts are critical in determining the success of special education and inclusion policies. Where there is an emphasis on collective values and the help from community members as found in Scandinavia, there will be greater chances for achieving better outcomes in integrating students with disabilities in regular classrooms. But there are tough hurdles that must be overcome in Asian, African, and Middle Eastern countries due to cultural stigma, lack of financial means and insufficient training of teachers. The key point made in the paper is that policies alone will not solve the problem, but social values, community involvement and culture beliefs will also play an equally significant role in the successful integration of such students. There will be an urgent need to tackle issues of cultural stigma as well as raise consciousness about disability in society as a whole. Also, there should be emphasis on providing necessary resources, which include adequate teacher training programs. Moreover, governments will have to involve local communities, families, and non-governmental organizations in the promotion of inclusiveness. Further research needs to examine longitudinal study for determining the effectiveness of inclusion policies within different cultures. Comparison between the interactions of policy, cultural attitudes, and educational outcomes can offer a better understanding of the effective inclusion practices. Moreover, researching about the effectiveness of teacher training practices within diverse cultural settings can provide valuable insights into how the practice can be used to advance inclusive education. Inclusive education plays a critical role in promoting equal educational opportunity among all students regardless of culture. This research shows the need to consider systemic barriers and cultural considerations in developing effective special education policies. Lastly, creating an inclusive educational setting requires collective efforts for helping out the children with disability worldwide.

## **References**

- Strogilos, V., & Avramidis, E. (2017). The cultural understanding of inclusion in diverse settings: Support services and collaboration. *The Wiley handbook of diversity in special education*, 87-113. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118768778.ch5>
- Brown, M. R., Dennis, J. P., & Matute-Chavarria, M. (2019). Cultural relevance in special education: Current status and future directions. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 54(5), 304-310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451218819252>
- Stangvik, G. (2010). Special education in society and culture: comparative and developmental perspectives. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(4), 349-358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2010.513539>
- Francisco, M. P. B., Hartman, M., & Wang, Y. (2020). Inclusion and special education. *Education Sciences*, 10(9), 238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10090238>
- Benson, S. K. (2023). Contextualizing inclusion policy: views from Jordanian special education teachers. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 22(3), 499-515. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-023-09344-5>
- Rodriguez, C. C., & Garro-Gil, N. (2015). Inclusion and integration on special education. *Procedia-social and behavioral sciences*, 191, 1323-1327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.488>
- Hardy, I., & Woodcock, S. (2015). Inclusive education policies: Discourses of difference, diversity and deficit. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(2), 141-164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.908965>
- Reindal, S. M. (2010). What is the purpose? Reflections on inclusion and special education from a capability perspective. *European journal of special needs education*, 25(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250903450806>
- Armstrong, D., Armstrong, A. C., & Spandagou, I. (2011). Inclusion: By choice or by chance? *International journal of inclusive education*, 15(1), 29-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2010.496192>

- Savolainen, H., Engelbrecht, P., Nel, M., & Malinen, O. P. (2012). Understanding teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in inclusive education: Implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education. *European journal of special needs education*, 27(1), 51-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2011.613603>
- Sharma, U., Loreman, T., & Forlin, C. (2012). Measuring teacher efficacy to implement inclusive practices. *Journal of research in special educational needs*, 12(1), 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-3802.2011.01200.x>
- Miles, S., & Singal, N. (2010). The education for all and inclusive education debate: Conflict, contradiction or opportunity? *International journal of inclusive education*, 14(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802265125>
- Florian, L. (2019). On the necessary co-existence of special and inclusive education. *International journal of inclusive education*, 23(7-8), 691-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1622801>
- Moriña, A. (2019). Inclusive education in higher education: challenges and opportunities. *Postsecondary educational opportunities for students with special education needs*, 3-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2016.1254964>
- Garcia, S. B., & Ortiz, A. A. (2013). Intersectionality as a framework for transformative research in special education. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.56829/muvo.13.2.yv7822w58116kw42>
- Pantić, N., & Florian, L. (2015). Developing teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice. *Education inquiry*, 6(3), 27311. <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v6.27311>
- Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Trent, S. C., Osher, D., & Ortiz, A. (2010). Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968–2008: A critique of underlying views of culture. *Exceptional Children*, 76(3), 279-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291007600303>
- Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & Shamberger, C. (2010). Co-teaching: An illustration of the complexity of collaboration in special education. *Journal of educational and psychological consultation*, 20(1), 9-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410903535380>
- Davies, M. (2018). International Policies that Support Inclusive Assessment. In: Elliott, S., Kettler, R., Beddow, P., Kurz, A. (eds) *Handbook of Accessible Instruction and Testing Practices*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71126-3\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71126-3_3)
- Wang, M., & Lam, Y. (2017). Evidence-based practice in special education and cultural adaptations: Challenges and implications for research. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 42(1), 53-61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796916685872>