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FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES, AND PERSISTENT BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has emerged as a global priority in the pursuit of equitable and accessible educational systems. However, its implementation faces numerous challenges stemming from inconsistent policies, structural inequalities, and uneven adoption of assistive technologies. These factors interact in complex ways, creating gaps between inclusive rhetoric and actual practices in educational settings. This article critically examines the interplay between educational policies, assistive technologies, and structural barriers that influence the global implementation of inclusive education. The analysis focuses on recent advancements and persistent obstacles between 2019 and 2024.A systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA approach, emphasizing empirical and theoretical studies indexed in Scopus. Studies published between 2019 and 2024 were selected based on rigorous inclusion criteria to ensure thematic and methodological quality. The analyzed studies, which include cases from Mexico, Uzbekistan, China, Italy, Austria, Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and France, were grouped into three key categories: 1. Assistive technologies, such as artificial intelligence, educational robotics, and agile methodologies, demonstrate significant potential for personalized learning, but face ethical and technical barriers. 2. Inclusive policies, which have seen notable regulatory advancements, are often hampered by fragmentation and inconsistent application. 3. Structural barriers included inadequate teacher training, persistent segregation, and unequal access to technological resources. This review provides a holistic perspective on the factors that facilitate or hinder inclusive education, offering updated evidence and concrete recommendations for designing more effective public policies and institutional strategies. It proposes strengthening regulatory frameworks, investing in teacher training in inclusive technologies, and fostering intersectoral cooperation to address structural barriers from a systemic perspective.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education; Assistive Technologies; Educational Policy; Structural Barriers; Systematic Literature Review.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone in transforming contemporary educational systems, advocating that all students, regardless of their individual or contextual characteristics, share a common learning environment. This vision, supported by international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006), challenges segregative practices by prioritizing equity, accessibility, and full participation in educational processes. Over recent decades, the concept of inclusion has evolved, expanding from a focus solely on disability to a broader perspective encompassing ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic dimensions. This shift has been driven by social movements and institutional reforms that question traditional special education models and promote more integrative approaches (Singh, 2024). Despite these normative and conceptual advances, numerous studies highlight a persistent gap between the formulation of inclusive policies and their effective implementation in school settings. Factors such as inadequate teacher training, the coexistence of parallel special education systems, territorial inequalities, and insufficient technical resources continue to limit the scope of inclusive education (Florian & Spratt, 2013; UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2016). In this context, assistive technologies have been promoted as promising tools for personalizing learning and facilitating participation of students with special educational needs. Solutions based on artificial intelligence, adaptive systems, or educational robotics offer innovative alternatives to reduce barriers; however, their effective integration depends on multiple factors: infrastructure availability, specialized training, ethical data handling, and equitable access (Akbarova et al., 2023; Mo & Mo, 2024). Although studies have individually analyzed these elements policies, technologies, or structural barriers few have examined their interrelations from a comprehensive, cross-cutting, and up-to-date perspective. This gap limits a holistic understanding of the challenges that educational systems face in transitioning to more inclusive models. This study aims to critically analyze how educational policies, assistive technologies, and structural barriers interact in the global implementation of inclusive education. Through a systematic review of recent literature (2019–2024), this study seeks to contribute an integrated perspective to guide policymakers, researchers, and educators toward more coherent, effective, and sustainable strategies.

2. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

2.1. Study Design

This study is framed within a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol, recognized for its methodological rigor and transparency in collecting and analyzing scientific evidence (Elsman et al., 2024). This methodological choice enables the identification, evaluation, and structured synthesis of relevant studies on the interaction between inclusive policies, educational technologies, and structural barriers.

2.2. Information Source

The Scopus database was selected as the sole search source due to its interdisciplinary coverage and the quality of its peer-reviewed publications. Scopus provides access to relevant international literature in the fields of education, technology, and public policy, which are central to this study (Baas et al., 2020).

2.3. Search Strategy

A specific search strategy was designed to optimize the retrieval of pertinent studies. The key terms used were:

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

These descriptors were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and adapted to Scopus's advanced search syntax. Pilot searches were conducted to refine the strategy and ensure the relevance of the results.

2.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria were applied to define the analysis corpus:

Inclusion:

- Publications from 2019 to 2024.
- Empirical or theoretical studies exploring the interrelation between educational policies, assistive technologies, and structural barriers.
- Articles in English or Spanish.
- Peer-reviewed studies with full text available.
- Exclusion:
- Studies not directly addressing inclusive education or the use of educational technologies.
- Conference abstracts, editorials, narrative or

non-systematic reviews.
- Duplicated or irrelevant documents based on title and abstract.

2.5. Selection Procedure

The initial search yielded 1,309 records. After removing 1,183 duplicates and applying eligibility criteria, 126 articles were selected for preliminary review. Titles and abstracts were analysed, resulting in 11 studies that fully met the established criteria. The process was conducted by two independent reviewers to minimize bias and ensure result reliability (see Figure 1).

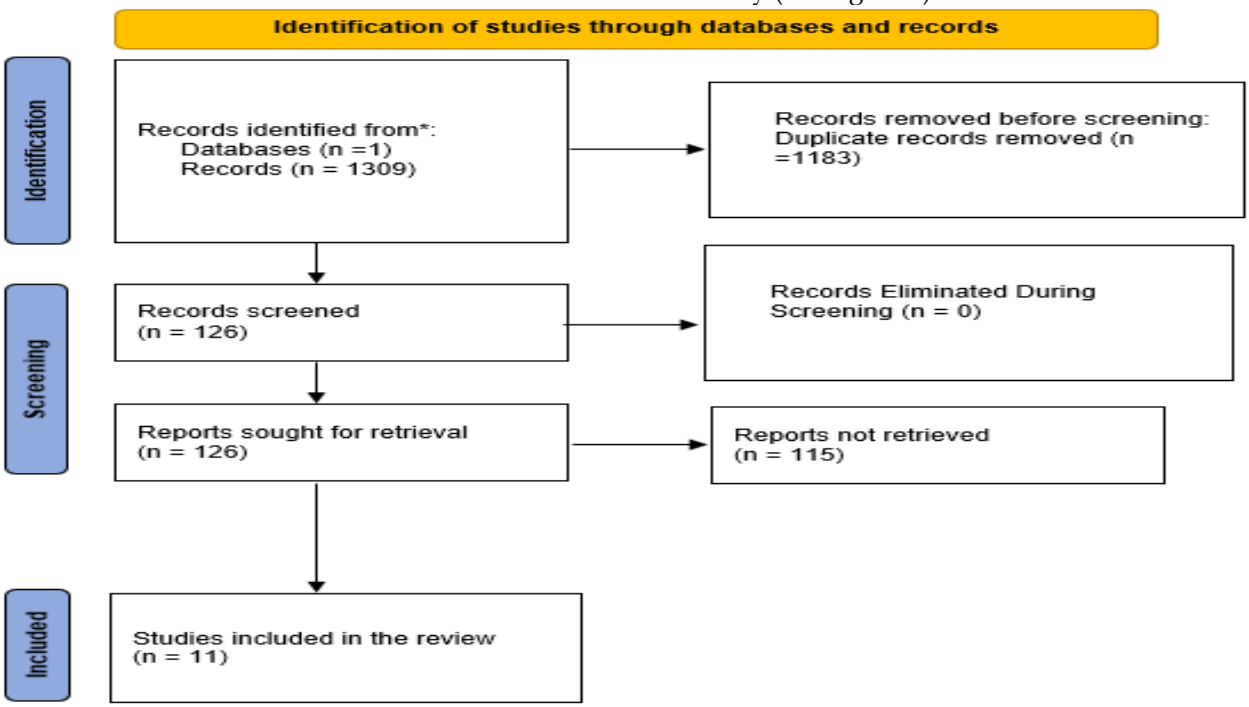

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram: Study Selection Process.

2.6. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Key information was extracted using a systematized matrix that included:
- Bibliographic references.
- Study objectives.
- Methodology used.
- Main findings related to the three thematic axes.
- Relevance to the objectives of this analysis.
- Results were organized into three thematic categories: assistive technologies, inclusive educational policies, and structural barriers, enabling a comparative and systematic interpretation.

Table 1 summarizes the 11 studies included in this review, highlighting their country of origin, methodological approach, thematic focus, and key findings. This comparative table allows for a clearer understanding of the scope and contributions of each study within the systematic analysis.

Table 1:

Autor y Año	País	Tipo	Tema	Hallazgos
Muñoz-Arteaga et al. (2023)	México	Empírico	Tecnologías	Scrum e ICT mejoran aprendizaje en dislexia
Akbarova et al. (2023)	Uzbekistán	Teórico	Tecnologías	IA y NLP en educación adaptativa
Mo & Mo (2024)	China	Empírico	Tecnologías	Reconocimiento de voz para discapacidad auditiva
Agrusti & Bonavolontà (2022)	Italia	Empírico	Tecnologías	Robótica educativa mejora habilidades cognitivas
Buchner & Proyer (2020)	Austria	Teórico	Políticas	Persisten estructuras paralelas
Shevlin & Banks (2021)	Irlanda	Empírico	Políticas	Clases especiales refuerzan segregación
Thomas et al. (2023)	Reino Unido	Teórico	Políticas	Privatización aumenta desigualdad
O'Leary et al. (2020)	EE.UU.	Empírico	Políticas	Talleres en STEM promueven equidad
Flood & Banks (2021)	Irlanda	Empírico	Barreras	Implementación desigual de UDL
DeMatthews & Knight (2019)	EE.UU.	Teórico	Barreras	Normas excluyentes por cupos SEN
Schneider et al. (2022)	Francia	Empírico	Barreras	Comorbilidades dificultan inclusión

2.7. Justification of the Analysis Period

The 2019–2024 period was chosen due to its significance in transformative developments in inclusive education, both in emerging technologies and post-pandemic policy formulation. This temporal delimitation ensures the currency and relevance of the findings.

3. THEMATIC FINDINGS: POLICIES, TECHNOLOGIES, AND BARRIERS

The systematic review identified three thematic categories that reflect the main dynamics surrounding the global implementation of inclusive education: assistive technologies, inclusive educational policies, and persistent structural barriers. The key findings for each axis are synthesized as follows. Figure 2 illustrates the thematic distribution of the selected studies across three analytical categories: assistive technologies, inclusive educational policies, and structural barriers. The predominance of studies focusing on assistive technologies reflects the growing academic interest in technological approaches to inclusive education.

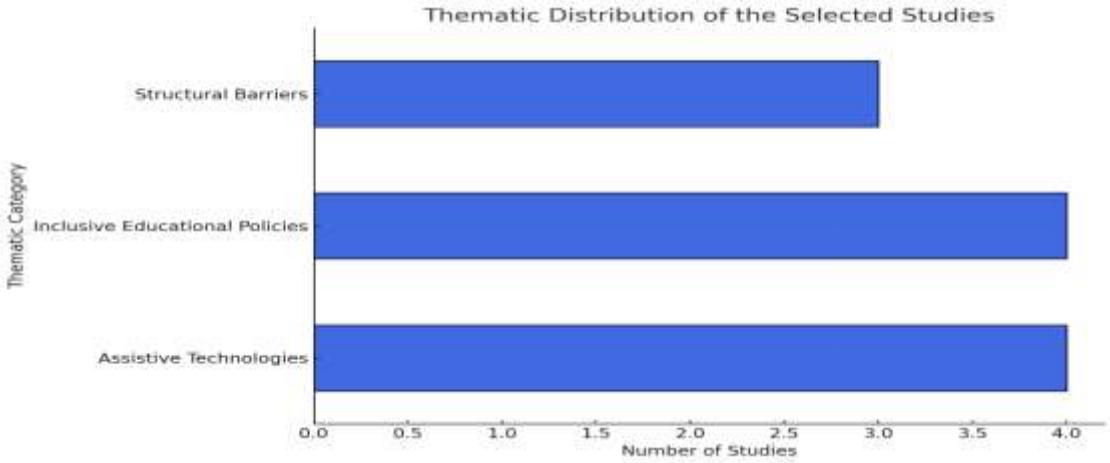

Figure 2: Thematic Distribution of Studies.

3.1. Assistive Technologies: Transformative Potential and Ethical Challenges

The reviewed studies agree that emerging technologies play a crucial role in transforming educational environments toward greater inclusivity. Tools such as artificial intelligence, adaptive systems, educational robotics, and agile methodologies have demonstrated significant potential for personalizing learning and facilitating access for students with specific needs. For instance, Muñoz-Arteaga et al. (2023) documented the use of scrum methodologies combined with ICT to adapt teaching to students with dyscalculia, achieving notable improvements in mathematical learning. Similarly, Akbarova et al. (2023) highlighted the use of machine learning, natural language processing, and computer vision to develop adaptive educational systems for students with visual or linguistic disabilities. Agrusti and Bonavolontà (2022) emphasized how these resources can enhance cognitive, social, and motivational skills in students with special educational needs (SEN). However, they noted that inadequate teacher training was a critical barrier to effective integration.

Additionally, Mo and Mo (2024) studied an AI-powered speech recognition system designed for students with hearing impairments and demonstrated improvements in semantic understanding and academic task efficiency. However, this also raises concerns about data privacy and equitable access.

3.2. Inclusive Educational Policies: Normative Advances and Implementation Gaps

Several studies examined the state of inclusive policies in specific national contexts, revealing both legislative progress and persistent gaps between policy design and practical application. In Austria, Buchner and Proyer (2020) describe a shift toward integrative models; however, the continued presence of dual-track systems and a medicalized perspective still limits full inclusion. Similarly, Shevlin and Banks (2021) observe that the expansion of special classes in Ireland although aligned with policy often sustains forms of educational separation. In contrast, New Brunswick, Canada, has established a legal framework that prioritizes inclusive practices within public education. This diverges from the British

context described by Thomas et al. (2023), where the increasing reliance on private specialized institutions contributes to growing disparities in educational access. O'Leary et al. (2020) analysed a teacher training initiative in STEM focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, which improved educators' awareness of implicit biases and promoted a more inclusive classroom environment. While inclusive policy gaps often stem from inconsistencies between regulatory frameworks and actual implementation, structural barriers refer to deeper systemic issues such as unequal funding, lack of training, or cultural resistance that persist even in the presence of progressive legislation. In many contexts, these dimensions intersect: for example, a poorly implemented policy may be further undermined by infrastructural deficiencies or professional unpreparedness, blurring the line between policy limitations and structural exclusion.

3.3. Structural Barriers: Teacher Training, Segmentation, and Inequality

Structural barriers remain a primary obstacle to achieving inclusive education. Inadequate teacher preparation, dual educational systems, and restrictive policies have been identified as recurring issues. Flood and Banks (2021) demonstrated that the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Ireland has been uneven due to a lack of conceptual understanding and adequate training. In the United States, DeMatthews and Knight (2019) documented how administrative constraints, such as percentage caps on identifying SEN, lead to exclusionary practices, particularly affecting impoverished communities. Schneider et al. (2022) highlighted how psychiatric comorbidities negatively impact the school adaptation of students with autism. This study emphasizes the need for comprehensive and personalized interventions using the International 3.4. Classification of Functioning (ICF) framework. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of addressing structural barriers through an intersectoral approach that combines coherent inclusive policies, specialized teacher training, and accessible technologies.

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The literature review revealed a complex web of interactions between educational policies, emerging technologies, and structural barriers shaping the current landscape of inclusive education. While normative and technological advances have been achieved in various contexts, significant gaps persist, hindering the realization of full and equitable inclusion.

4.1. Assistive Technologies: Technical Progress vs. Access Inequalities

Assistive technologies show a high potential for facilitating personalized learning and reducing disability-related barriers, as evidenced by Muñoz-Arteaga et al. (2023) and Akbarova et al. (2023). However, their real-world impact depends on factors, such as infrastructure availability, teacher training, and robust ethical frameworks. Mo and Mo (2024) illustrate how AI-based tools can transform the educational experience for students with hearing impairments but also highlight the risk of exacerbating inequality without equitable access. The literature agrees that, while these technologies open new pedagogical possibilities aligned with principles like UDL (CAST, 2018), their effective adoption is constrained by the digital divide, institutional resistance to change, and a lack of specialized training.

4.2. Inclusive Policies: From Legal Frameworks to Practical Fragmentation

The analysis of educational policies in contexts such as Austria, Ireland, England, and Canada revealed a divergence between normative intentions and effective implementation. While some countries have advanced toward integrative models, others continue to operate under segregative or medicalized logic. The persistence of parallel structures such as special classes or private specialized schools highlights the tension between inclusive rhetoric and practical system decisions (Thomas et al., 2023). These findings suggest the need for more critical analytical frameworks, such as Slee's (2011) transformative inclusion approach, which advocates not only integrating diverse students into existing systems, but also reforming the structures and practices that generate exclusion.

4.3. Structural Barriers: Systemic Inequalities and Lack of Coordination

Structural barriers, such as inadequate teacher preparation and educational segmentation, not only hinder inclusion, but also perpetuate inequity dynamics. The reviewed studies show that, even when progressive policies or technologies are available, their effectiveness is limited by the absence of suitable institutional and cultural conditions. DeMatthews and Knight (2019) reveal how seemingly neutral regulations, such as percentage caps on SEN identification, can have exclusionary

effects.

Similarly, Schneider et al. (2022) warned that a reductive view of students, disconnected from their biopsychosocial context, diminishes the effectiveness of inclusive strategies. Our findings, consistent with pre 2019 literature, confirm that assistive technologies such as Web 2.0, mobile devices, and specialized hardware significantly enhance inclusion, accessibility, and academic engagement for students with disabilities (Fernández Batanero et al., 2022; Alammary et al., 2017; Arouri et al., 2020). However, earlier studies also identified persistent barriers, such as insufficient teacher training, lack of funding, negative attitudes, and challenges in resource management (Flanagan et al., 2013; Johnstone et al., 2009).

In contrast, our study highlights recent advances, for example the integration of artificial intelligence, extended reality, and more inclusive policies, which underline a qualitative evolution in tools and a greater emphasis on teacher capacity-building and contextual adaptation. From this perspective, the review's results underscore the urgency of moving beyond fragmented approaches and advancing toward systemic strategies that integrate policies, technologies, and educational practices under the logic of equity and social justice.

4.4. Regional Disparities: Contrasting the Global North and Global South

The reviewed literature reveals clear disparities between Global North and Global South contexts regarding the implementation of inclusive education. In countries such as Austria, Ireland, and Canada, policy frameworks are more consolidated, and assistive technologies are often integrated into national education systems albeit with persistent structural contradictions. By contrast, studies from the Global South, such as those conducted in Mexico or Uzbekistan, underscore fundamental challenges related to infrastructure, digital divides, and inconsistent teacher training.

These systemic limitations exacerbate exclusion and hinder the effective adoption of inclusive innovations. Moreover, while the Global North struggles with over-medicalization and educational stratification, the Global South often faces more basic access issues, including resource scarcity and lack of intersectoral coordination.

These contextual differences suggest that inclusive education cannot rely on universal policy models; rather, it must be adapted to regional realities through localized strategies and culturally responsive frameworks.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTIONS

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the factors that influence the global effectiveness of inclusive education. By analysing policies, assistive technologies, and structural barriers, it identifies a landscape marked by significant advances and contradictions that require urgent attention. Overall, emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and educational robotics, offer concrete opportunities to personalize learning and enhance accessibility. However, their implementation is hindered by infrastructure gaps, digital inequality, and a lack of specialized teacher training. On the policy front, normative progress is evident in various national contexts, but a disconnect persists between legal frameworks and their practical applications. This gap, combined with models influenced by medicalized or segregative approaches, limits the transformative impact of inclusive policies. Likewise, structural barriers, such as institutional segmentation, resource scarcity, and regulatory tensions, continue to reproduce forms of exclusion, even within systems that define themselves as inclusive. These limitations demand a systemic restructuring of school environments centered on the principles of equity, participation, and educational justice.

5.1. Research Projections and Recommendations

The recommendations derived from this review can be distinguished between short-term and long-term priorities. In the short term, efforts should focus on strengthening teacher capacities, facilitating access to existing assistive technologies, and correcting immediate implementation gaps. In the long term, systemic changes are needed such as reforming dual-track educational structures, embedding inclusion in national curricula, and fostering sustained intersectoral collaboration to achieve enduring transformation.

Based on the findings, the following action lines are proposed for future research and policy formulation:

- Strengthen teacher training, particularly in the ethical and pedagogical use of inclusive technologies.
- Develop robust regulatory frameworks to ensure equitable access and data protection in digitized educational contexts.
- Promote intersectoral partnerships among governments, educational institutions,

technology stakeholders, and communities to design contextually adapted strategies.
- Explore cross-cutting approaches that integrate intersectionalities (gender, ethnicity, poverty) into the analysis of inclusive education.

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