

# BRIDGING POLICY AND PRACTICE: EXAMINING THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Inclusive education has become a central objective of educational policy across many national contexts. Despite strong policy commitments, the translation of inclusive principles into classroom practice remains inconsistent. This study examines the gap between inclusive education policy and its implementation in secondary school settings. Drawing on qualitative data from classroom observations and teacher interviews, the paper analyzes how policy expectations are interpreted and enacted at the school level. The findings reveal a persistent misalignment between policy discourse and classroom realities, shaped by institutional constraints, resource limitations, and differing interpretations of inclusion. The study highlights the need for more context-sensitive policy design and stronger support structures for teachers. By integrating empirical insights with policy analysis, the paper contributes to a more grounded understanding of inclusive education.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, education policy, implementation gap, classroom practice, qualitative research.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, inclusive education has been firmly established as a guiding principle in educational policy. Governments and international organizations have emphasized the importance of providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. Policy documents often present inclusion as both a moral imperative and a practical goal, outlining commitments to accessibility, participation, and diversity.

However, the presence of policy does not guarantee its realization. Teachers frequently encounter challenges when attempting to translate these broad principles into concrete classroom practices. This disconnection raises an important question: why does a gap persist between policy intention and classroom implementation?

This paper addresses this question by examining how inclusive education policies are interpreted and enacted in everyday teaching contexts.

## **2. Policy Context and Conceptual Orientation**

Inclusive education policies typically emphasize principles such as equal access, participation, and the removal of barriers to learning. While these principles are widely endorsed, they are often expressed in general terms that leave room for interpretation.

From a theoretical perspective, policy implementation is not a linear process. Policies are not simply applied; they are interpreted, adapted, and sometimes reshaped by practitioners. Teachers play a central role in this process, acting as mediators between policy expectations and classroom realities.

This study adopts an interpretive approach, viewing policy implementation as a socially situated process influenced by institutional conditions and professional judgment.

## **3. Methodology**

The research is based on a qualitative study conducted in two secondary schools that operate within inclusive education frameworks. Data was collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers.

The observations focused on everyday teaching practices, paying particular attention to how lessons were structured, how students were supported, and how diversity was addressed. Interviews explored teachers' understanding of inclusive policy and their experiences in implementing it.

The data was analyzed thematically, with attention to recurring patterns in how teachers described and enacted inclusion.

#### **4. Results**

The findings reveal a complex relationship between policy expectations and classroom practice. While teachers expressed general agreement with the principles of inclusion, their interpretations varied significantly.

One prominent pattern was the tendency to equate inclusion with physical presence rather than meaningful participation. In several observed classrooms, students with additional learning needs were present but not fully engaged in the learning process. Teachers often acknowledged this limitation, explaining that time constraints and curriculum pressures made it difficult to provide individualized support.

Another finding relates to the ambiguity of policy language. Teachers frequently described inclusive education policies as broad and open-ended, which allowed flexibility but also created uncertainty. Without clear guidance, teachers relied on their own understanding of inclusion, leading to variations in practice across classrooms.

Resource limitations also played a significant role. Participants highlighted the lack of support staff, limited access to specialized training, and large class sizes as barriers to effective implementation. These constraints shaped how inclusion was enacted, often resulting in partial or selective application of inclusive strategies.

Despite these challenges, the study also identified examples of adaptive practice. Some teachers demonstrated creative approaches to inclusion, such as modifying tasks during lessons, encouraging peer collaboration, and using varied forms of assessment. These practices, however, depended largely on individual initiative rather than systemic support.

#### **5. Discussion**

The results suggest that the gap between policy and practice is not simply a matter of inadequate implementation, but a reflection of deeper structural and conceptual issues. Policies often present inclusion as a universal and achievable goal, yet they do not fully account for the complexities of classroom environments.

One key issue is the mismatch between policy abstraction and practical specificity. While policies emphasize ideals such as equity and participation, teachers require concrete guidance on how to realize these principles in diverse

and time-constrained settings. The absence of such guidance places a significant interpretive burden on teachers.

Another important consideration is the role of institutional context. Schools operate within systems that prioritize curriculum coverage, standardized assessment, and administrative efficiency. These priorities can conflict with the flexibility required for inclusive practice. As a result, teachers are often forced to navigate competing demands, leading to compromises in how inclusion is enacted.

The findings also highlight the importance of teacher agency. While structural constraints are significant, teachers are not passive implementers of policy. They actively interpret and adapt policies based on their beliefs, experiences, and classroom realities. This suggests that effective inclusion depends not only on policy design but also on supporting teachers' capacity for reflective and adaptive practice.

## **6. Implications for Policy and Practice**

The study indicates that improving inclusive education requires a shift in how policies are conceptualized and implemented. Rather than focusing solely on broad principles, policymakers should consider the practical conditions under which teachers work. This includes providing clearer guidance, ensuring adequate resources, and creating opportunities for professional development.

At the same time, schools should foster environments that support collaboration and reflection among teachers. Sharing experiences and strategies can help bridge the gap between policy and practice, making inclusion a more collective and sustainable effort.

## **7. Conclusion**

Inclusive education policies represent an important commitment to equity and diversity. However, their effectiveness depends on how they are interpreted and enacted in real classroom contexts. This study has shown that the gap between policy and practice is shaped by a combination of ambiguity, constraints, and professional judgment.

Addressing this gap requires not only better policy design but also greater attention to the lived realities of teaching. By grounding inclusive education in

classroom practice, it becomes possible to move from aspiration to meaningful implementation.

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