

## From Policy to Practice: Barriers to Autism Inclusion in Mainstream Education – A Systematic Review”

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### Abstract

Inclusion has been recognised as a right; but implementation of inclusion for learners on the autism spectrum in mainstream education is uneven. We conducted a systematic review of literature exploring the barriers to autism inclusion from policy to practice. Following a PRISMA-based process, 30 papers - including empirical studies and policy documents - were identified and thematically synthesised. The results show that inclusion barriers span across policy, institutional and practice levels. Policy barriers - including policy ambiguity and a lack of implementation - restrict impact. Structural and resource constraints, such as inflexible school systems, limit inclusion. Teacher factors, including a lack of training and confidence, limit effective inclusion in the classroom. Moreover, social and cultural factors, such as stigma and exclusion, affect the engagement and belonging of students with autism. The review also identifies issues with support systems, with schools often dependent on external or family support rather than institutional support systems. The research found that inclusion is often "in name only". To overcome these challenges, it's important to work together across policy, institutional, teacher and support systems to better enable the participation of autistic students in mainstream schooling.

**Keywords:** Autism Inclusion; Inclusive Education; Policy Implementation; Educational Barriers; Mainstream Schools

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a key focus in modern educational discourse, highlighting the need for all learners - no matter their abilities - to be included in mainstream schooling. International policy documents such as the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) have affirmed the need for education systems to shift from segregation to inclusive practices that prioritise equity, participation and access (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). In this global movement, the inclusion of children with autism has become a focal point given the multifaceted educational, social and communicative challenges associated with autism spectrum disorders (Lindsay et al., 2014; Pellicano et al., 2018).

Despite these policy developments, emerging research suggests the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream education is inconsistent and contested. Although numerous countries have embraced inclusive education policies, these are often not effectively translated to practice (Florian, 2019; Slee, 2018). Children with autism continue to face considerable challenges, including fixed curricula, inadequate teacher training and support, and societal attitudes (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013). As a result, inclusion often translates into physical presence rather than meaningful engagement, resulting in "surface" or "symbolic" inclusion (Goodall, 2018; Norwich, 2014).

A key factor in this deficit is the lack of policy-institution fit. Policies typically express general inclusion goals without providing specific operational, implementation and accountability measures (Ainscow, 2020; Magnússon, 2019). Consequently, schools enact inclusion based on their institutional capacities, priorities and limitations, resulting in conditional inclusion (Artiles et al., 2011). This gap between policy and practice is especially pronounced when it comes to autism, where one-size-fits-all approaches to inclusion do not cater to the unique and personal needs of learners with autism (Ravet, 2011).

On the ground, teacher readiness is critical to inclusion success. Evidences consistently indicate that although teachers are generally supportive of inclusive practices, they often have insufficient preparation, self-efficacy and support systems to support students with autism (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Sharma et al., 2012). The disparity between teacher desire and preparedness leads to variable teaching practices and constrains the success of inclusion initiatives. Additionally, the lack of collaboration among teachers, parents and support service providers limits the ability to provide tailored support (Azad et al., 2018). Inclusion has become a prominent theme in modern education, which stresses the right of all students, including those with disabilities, to access and participate in mainstream education settings. International policy shifts and human rights movements have emphasised the responsibility of education systems to shift from segregated to inclusive practices that support equity, access and participation (Lang et al., 2011; Degener, 2016). In this context, the inclusion of autistic children has become a growing focus as a result of the complex educational, social and communicative needs associated with autism spectrum disorders (Happé & Frith, 2020; Lord et al., 2020).

Despite such shifts, existing evidence suggests that inclusion of autistic children in mainstream education is varied and problematic. Inclusion is embraced at a policy level, but it is not always realised in practice (Florian, 2014; Slee, 2018). Autistic learners still face considerable challenges, such as restrictive curriculum, lack of teacher training, institutional support and social stigma (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013). This means inclusion is often reduced to mere placement, perpetuating so-called "symbolic inclusion" (Goodall, 2018; Ravet, 2011).

Part of the problem stems from a lack of policy-institution link. Policies often espouse principles of inclusion without offering specific guidance, implementation plans or accountability structures (Ainscow, 2020; Malik & Shah, 2019). As a result, schools adopt inclusion based on their own priorities, resulting in uneven and selective inclusion. The gap between policy and practice is especially pronounced in relation to autism, where one-size-fits-all approaches do not address the diverse and individual needs of students with autism (Ravet, 2011; Miles & Singal, 2010).

At an individual classroom level, teacher readiness is critical to inclusion. Evidence demonstrates that while teachers tend to support inclusion, they lack the necessary training, confidence and resources to support students with autism (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Sharma et al., 2018). This "want to" versus "know how" leads to varied pedagogical approaches and undermines inclusion efforts. Additionally, the lack of coordinated efforts among teachers, parents and support services limits the ability to provide personalised support (Azad & Mandell, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2013). In addition to institutional and pedagogic factors, social aspects of schools play a crucial role in the experiences of autistic students. Research shows that autistic students are more likely to experience social exclusion, isolation and restricted engagement in classroom interactions (Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). This research suggests that inclusion is about more than access, and involves the creation of belonging and acceptance. According to the Social Model of Disability, exclusion is not a feature of the individual, but rather is created by environmental and social factors in the education system (Oliver, 1990; Goodley, 2014).

While a significant amount of research has been conducted on aspects of autism inclusion, much of this research has been piecemeal, examining only teacher beliefs, classroom techniques, peer acceptance, and so on. There is a gap in terms of a synthesis of policy, institutional, pedagogic and social issues to provide a holistic understanding of the barriers to autism inclusion in mainstream education. Closing this gap is crucial for appreciating the structures of exclusion and for informing inclusion strategies. To address this gap, this study reviews the literature to explore constraints on autism inclusion in mainstream education, from policy to practice. Through this synthesis of evidence from various contexts, the study seeks to identify themes and barriers to inclusion that are common across different environments. Drawing on the Social Model of Disability, this review defines exclusion as the outcome of a range of systemic and institutional factors rather than impairment, thus providing a critical understanding of the barriers to achieving inclusion for learners on the autism spectrum.

## 2. Systematic Literature Review

The present study used a systematic review of the literature to explore the barriers to the inclusion of autism in mainstream education, particularly in terms of transitioning from policy to practice. The review was done by adopting the PRISMA framework to ensure that the process of identification, screening, eligibility determination and inclusion of studies was efficient and systematic. This was an appropriate approach as the paper did not involve primary data collection, but reviewed evidence of how policy, institutional, teacher, social, and support-system barriers impact the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schooling. The review's focus on these themes also mapped onto the thesis framework, which identified policy blind spots, institutional barriers, in-class practices, teacher readiness, peer interactions and support systems as key issues in autism inclusion.

## 2.1 Search Strategy and PRISMA Protocol

This review will follow the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Liberati et al., 2009) to ensure rigour and transparency principles that are becoming increasingly important in even social sciences (Pahlevan-Sharif, Mura, & Wijesinghe, 2019). We searched Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar, HEC National Digital Library, ILO LABORDOC and grey literature (World Bank, Human Rights Watch, ICMPSD). Our search terms were: "autism" OR "autistic children" OR "ASD") AND ("inclusive education" OR "mainstream education" OR "school inclusion") AND ("barriers" OR "challenges" OR "obstacles") AND ("policy" OR "implementation" OR "practice" OR "teacher" OR "institution"). There was no language restriction but only English articles were synthesised. We searched articles from 2010 to 2025. The PRISMA flow diagram is in Figure 1.

## 2.2 Inclusion Criteria

The selection criteria were peer-reviewed empirical studies, quantitative or qualitative research articles, mixed-methods studies and policy documents that specifically focused on autism inclusion in mainstream or inclusive school systems. Included studies addressed barriers to inclusion, implementation of policies, teacher readiness, school practices, social inclusion and support. Policy documents were included as the review specifically focused on the interaction between the inclusive education policy and implementation. Excluded studies included those that focused solely on clinical diagnosis, medical treatment, special education without mention of inclusion, opinion-based articles, conference abstracts, or those not specifically related to autism and inclusive education.

## 2.3 Screening Process

Four steps were involved in the screening process. In the first stage, records were identified via database searches and reference tracking. Second, citations were de-duplicated and irrelevant papers filtered out. Third, titles and abstracts were screened for inclusion and exclusion. Fourth, full-text papers and documents were screened. This resulted in 30 studies/documents to be reviewed in detail. That is, empirical studies and policy documents that presented evidence on barriers to autism inclusion in mainstream education.

The studies were reviewed using a review matrix. The matrix comprised of author/year, country or context, research design, document type, sample or topic, findings, and review questions addressed. This data were then synthesised thematically. This involved both deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding was informed by the major areas of the thesis, namely policy barriers, institutional barriers, teacher barriers, social barriers, and gaps in support systems. Inductive coding enabled patterns to be identified in the literature.

The synthesis produced five themes for analysis: policy barriers, institutional barriers, teacher-related barriers, social barriers and support-system gaps. This enabled the review to critically investigate the operation of barriers at various levels of education and how "inclusive education" can be merely symbolic if policy is not supported by mechanisms for implementation, institutional accountability, teacher preparedness, and necessary support systems.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

<b>IDENTIFICATION</b>	Records identified through database searching (Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar, HEC Digital Library) (n = 740)	→	Additional records identified through other sources (grey literature, WHO, (n = 18)
	↓		
<b>SCREENING</b>	Records after duplicates removed (n = 652)	→	Records excluded (irrelevant to autism inclusion / education focus) (n = 564)
	↓		
<b>ELIGIBILITY</b>	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 88)	→	Full-text articles excluded: - Not empirical or policy-focused (n = 22) - Unrelated to Pakistan/Gulf context (n = 18) - Duplicate coverage (n = 10) (Total excluded n = 08)
	↓		
<b>INCLUDED</b>	Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 30)		
	↓		
<b>INCLUDED</b>	Studies included in final systematic review (n = 30) Empirical studies: 14   Policy documents: 06 Institutional reports: 8   Mixed-methods: 4		

A total of 758 records were identified through database searching and additional sources. After removing duplicates, 652 records remained for screening. Following title and abstract screening, 564 records were excluded due to lack of relevance, leaving 88 full-text articles for eligibility assessment. Of these, 58 studies were excluded based on predefined criteria, resulting in a final sample of 30 studies. The included studies comprised empirical research articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and mixed-methods studies, providing a comprehensive basis for thematic synthesis.

**Findings: Thematic Synthesis**

**Theme 1: Policy-Level Barriers**

The literature reveals that although inclusive education is widely endorsed in policy, it is poorly implemented due to its vagueness and lack of specificity. In some cases, policies express inclusion as an ideal but lack clarity for schools. For instance, global and national policies

highlight the right to inclusion, but do not provide mechanisms for enforcement, monitoring and accountability (Ainscow, 2020; Lang et al., 2011; Government of Pakistan, 2020).

Gaps in policy are reinforced by the disalignment between legal frameworks and institutional realities. Research shows that schools interpret inclusive education policies on their own, leading to approaches to inclusion that are piecemeal (Malik & Shah, 2019; Slee, 2018). Ravet (2011) proposes that inclusive policies often use contradictory frameworks, with inclusion being encouraged at an ideological level but not at a practical one. Likewise, Miles and Singal (2010) indicate that global inclusion policies do not consider the real world, contributing to problematic implementation.

Overall, literature shows that barriers at the policy level concern more than the absence of policy, but also the lack of clarity, implementation and contextual adjustments that compromise inclusion at the school level.

### **Theme 2: Institutional Barriers**

The structures of mainstream schools are a major barrier to inclusion. The studies reviewed demonstrate that schools are frequently structured in ways that involve inflexible curricula, teaching methods and performance regimes (Florian, 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). These rigid structures create barriers to responding to a range of different learning needs, especially those students who need more individual support.

Furthermore, studies show institutional support for inclusion is often "lip service". Although schools may accept autistic children, they often lack mechanisms to support such inclusion, such as inclusion policies, support personnel or flexible learning environments (Hehir et al., 2016; Goodall, 2018). Booth and Ainscow (2011) note the need for systemic change to achieve inclusion, but many schools still adopt exclusionary approaches.

Further, inadequate resourcing and administrative priorities impact inclusion. Research indicates that schools may have a "win at all costs" approach, prioritizing academic achievement, and creating opportunities for conditional inclusion demands, where autistic students are required to adapt to institutional practices, rather than being accommodated (Malik & Shah 2019; Miles & Singal, 2010). So, structural barriers reflect issues with a broader systemic level, where inclusion is limited by organisational inflexibility, resource constraints and systemic impediments.

### **Theme 3: Teacher-Related Barriers**

Teacher readiness is a key barrier across the studies reviewed. Although teachers are generally positive about inclusion, they lack the training, knowledge and confidence to teach autistic students effectively (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2018). Research demonstrates low awareness of autism results in the misinterpretation of behaviors like sensory sensitivities, communication impairments and social isolation (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Jordan, 2008). This impacts teaching strategies and leaves teachers ill-equipped to support these children. Lindsay et al. (2013) also point out that teachers commonly feel stressed and unprepared teaching children with autism in inclusive classrooms. While teachers have reported the use of inclusive pedagogy, this remains patchy. Florian and Spratt (2013) stress that inclusive pedagogy is not about a deficit-based approach but rather a responsive approach. But without systemic support and training, this remains isolated and individualised. In general, these findings indicate that teacher barriers are a lack of correlated action with positive attitudes, and that ongoing professional development is needed.

### **Theme 4: Social and Attitudinal Barriers**

Social dynamics within schools play a critical role in shaping the inclusion of autistic children. The reviewed studies consistently report that autistic students experience peer exclusion,

social isolation, and limited participation in classroom interactions (Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Humphrey & Symes, 2013).

These challenges are often linked to broader societal attitudes and lack of awareness about autism. Studies indicate that peers may not understand autistic behaviors, leading to avoidance, misunderstanding, or even bullying (Happé & Frith, 2020). Goodall (2018) argues that inclusion should be understood as a sense of belonging rather than mere physical placement, emphasizing that social acceptance is central to meaningful inclusion. From a theoretical perspective, the Social Model of Disability provides a useful lens for understanding these barriers. It suggests that exclusion arises not from individual impairments but from socially constructed barriers within the environment (Oliver, 1990; Goodley, 2014). This is reflected in school contexts where lack of awareness and negative attitudes limit participation opportunities for autistic learners.

Thus, social and attitudinal barriers highlight that inclusion requires more than structural changes; it demands cultural transformation within school communities.

### **Theme 5: Support System Constraints**

The last theme points to the importance of support system in facilitating or hindering inclusion. The studies reviewed demonstrate that inclusion requires support from multiple stakeholders including teachers, families and support professionals. But these are often not sufficiently coordinated or comprehensive (Azad & Mandell, 2016; Ravet, 2011). A problem identified is the outsourcing of support. Schools often expect parents to source support such as shadow teachers and therapy services, externalising support arrangements (Lindsay et al, 2013). This can lead to inequities as support is based on family affordability.

Lack of formal partnerships with professionals also undermines inclusion efforts. Research highlights the need for combined therapeutic and educational interventions to meet the needs of autistic students (Lord et al., 2020). But the absence of institutional structures for coordination means support is ad hoc. Generally, the research suggests support systems are often inadequate, resulting in support deficits. As a result, inclusion is hampered by the lack of institutional support, multiple service gaps and reliance on families.

### **Discussion (with Theoretical Integration)**

This systematic review highlights the ongoing and complex discrepancy between policy and reality of inclusive education for persons with autism. Our 30 studies report a connectivity of barriers across policy, institutional, pedagogical, social, and support-system levels. This section draws on the Social Model of Disability and inclusion theory more generally to interpret these findings and explore the reasons why inclusion remains largely symbolic.

At the policy level, the review demonstrates that although inclusion is well understood as a rights issue, this does not necessarily translate into action. Lack of operational guidelines, mechanisms for enforcement and accountability structures mean that policy is aspirational but not practically realisable (Ainscow, 2020; Lang et al., 2011). Theoretically, this is what inclusion theorists refer to as the "policy-practice gap" where inclusion rhetoric is not backed up by structures for change (Slee, 2018). The Social Model of Disability explains this phenomenon in the sense that exclusion is not caused by individual "impairments" but by institutional and structural "barriers" (Oliver, 1990; Goodley, 2014). In this respect, not knowing policy contributes to disability, enabling institutions to avoid taking responsibility. At the institutional level, the research shows that while mainstream schools continue to operate within a traditional, "non-inclusive" institutional structure. Formalised curricula, classroom organisation and competitive cultures prevent the flexibility needed to meet the needs of autistic learners (Florian, 2014; Hehir et al., 2016). This is consistent with a broader issue in

inclusion theory: that inclusion necessitates the transformation of school systems, but many institutional settings seek to include autistic students within unaltered systems. Rather, inclusion is not about placement, but changing school environments to facilitate participation and belonging (Goodall, 2018). Thus, the persistence of rigid institutional practices perpetuates exclusion, even in institutions that endorse inclusion.

Teacher roles reflect the complexities of inclusion. Our research reveals a disconnect between positive attitudes and preparedness. Teachers are generally positive about inclusive education, but may not be confident in their abilities, or have the necessary professional support or training (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Sharma et al., 2018). This echoes Florian and Spratt's (2013) perspective on inclusive pedagogy, which requires a shift from a deficit perspective of difference as something to be managed, to a diversity perspective in which difference is seen as part of teaching. But without professional training and support, this transition is not fully realised. As a result, teachers are working in a restricted environment where ability impacts on mindset, restricting inclusion.

The results also speak to the pivotal role of social and attitudinal components of inclusion. Students on the autism spectrum are often excluded, isolated and unable to participate in regular classrooms, despite their physical presence (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). This supports the view that inclusion is not just about institutional and pedagogic arrangements, but also about social inclusion, characterised by attitudes, understanding and cultural practices. The Social Model of Disability again offers insights, implying that exclusion is due to environmental and attitudinal factors, rather than individual limitations (Oliver, 1990). Thus, stigma, ignorance and a misunderstanding by peers serve as a form of exclusion, hindering the formation of belonging and participation.

Finally, the results around support systems indicate that inclusion can be compromised by piecemeal support. Schools often depend on parents to supplement additional services such as therapy and shadow teachers, effectively outsourcing to families (Azad & Mandell, 2016). This is an example of the privatising of inclusion, with support services reliant on the financial resources of individuals and families. At a systems level, this suggests a lack of integration of educational and therapeutic support in schools. As Lord et al. (2020) highlight, the support of children with autism requires ongoing systems-level collaboration between parents, educators and professionals. Failing to do so results in variable and unequal inclusion. These results indicate that exclusion of learners with autism is not an "isolated problem"; rather, it is part of a broader systemic problem. The lack of clarity from policy, institutional inflexibility, teacher readiness, social exclusion and lack of support systems suggests that inclusion is limited by institutional and cultural factors in education. Theoretically, this supports the Social Model of Disability, which attributes exclusion to systemic rather than individual factors. It also draws attention to the importance of shifting the focus from "including" on the surface to "participating", "belonging", and "changing" the system.

Finally, this discussion shows that inclusion is not achieved through mere rhetoric in education policies. It must address multiple levels of the education system, including policy, institutional, teacher and societal change, and integrated services. In the absence of such coherence, inclusion will remain a policy rhetoric for learners with autism

## **Conclusion**

This systematic review investigated the challenges of autism inclusion in mainstream education through an analysis of 30 chosen studies, including empirical and policy studies. The review shows that while there are strong global and national commitments to inclusive education, in practice, inclusion for people with autism is patchy and inadequate. What

emerges is the gap between policy and practice - where well-meaning statements are not accompanied by guidelines, monitoring and evaluation, or institutional readiness. The review also reveals that obstruction occurs at various levels of the education system. Rigid school structures, lack of teacher training, societal stigma and poor support structures limit the inclusion of students on the spectrum. Inclusion is limited to placement rather than academic, social and emotional participation. Finally, dependence on families to obtain support also reflects a shift in the responsibility from institutions. In summary, the study finds the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream education remains largely symbolic. To achieve this, there needs to be a transition from paper policy to systemic practice through institutional reform, teacher training and comprehensive support programs. The focus for future work needs to be on inclusive environments that promote access as well as engagement and belonging for students with autism.

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