

Navigating the Complex Terrain of Inclusive Education in K-12 Schools through an Ecological Perspective

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Introduction

Inclusive education, a topic ever evolving in the context of education in K-12 schools, aims to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. According to Inclusion BC (n.d.), as retrieved in November 2023, "Inclusive education welcomes all students into regular classes with same-age peers in their community, with supports or accommodations that ensure equitable opportunities for all students to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of school life" (para. 1). As they further elaborate, it is not just limited to the school and the classroom, but it also extends to the programs, activities, and even to the community, contributing to a participative approach when acquiring quality education (Inclusion BC, n.d., para. 2).

However, implementing and establishing policies for inclusion has its challenges. As Theoharis (2013) highlighted, particular implementations of inclusive education are paradoxical to its real essence. For instance, the concept of "inclusion rooms" in schools emphasizes that inclusivity has become limited to a confined and specific area rather than being an indispensable part of the school environment (as cited in Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Simultaneously, the attitudes concerning inclusivity with statements such as "We did inclusion" or "We tried inclusion" shows that it is more of a task to be completed than making it a practice and that it has merely become a misinterpreted label than the true sense of inclusive education (Theoharis, 2013, p. 19, as cited in Thompson & Timmons, 2017).

In order to address this situation, this essay will explore the complex process of establishing and implementing inclusive policies and practices in the K-12 sector while focusing on its specific challenges. These multifaceted challenges will be examined through a

broad ecological lens, drawing from various scholarly resources. It is possible that the study of child characteristics (biosystem), practices in the classroom (microsystem), family (mesosystem), social policies (exosystem), and culture (macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) could provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of these policies and practices aiming to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the topic and to initiate meaningful changes in inclusive education.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Framework in Inclusive Education

The ecological perspective, as introduced by Bronfenbrenner, can be considered a framework to "gain richer insight into a variety of systems" (Akbayrak & Douglas, 2022) as it considers multiple levels of influence on a child. Bronfenbrenner (1976) states that the ecological experiment identifies systems and processes impacting the learner's development. He further clarifies it as follows:

"It [ecological framework] must perform the more scientifically fruitful task of providing a highly differentiated and thereby sensitive grid that makes possible more precise detection of differences and changes in the state and structure of ecological system."

(Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p.6)

Through this, the environment the child is exposed to in the inclusive education system can have impacts on the learning experience and the quality of education. This idea is further supported by Mitchell (2015), who explains that the multifacetedness of inclusive education requires educators at all systems to attend to "vision, placement, curriculum, assessment, teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources, and leadership" (p.28) and that it is not appropriate to solely define it on the placement (Mitchell, 2015).

Existing challenges in inclusive education

Inclusive education has evolved throughout history, gradually shifting from a concern only for individuals with disabilities to total participation of society towards a broader thought of inclusivity. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, the UN International Year of Disabled Persons, and the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are some significant introductions towards inclusive education (Foreman, 2018). However, this evolution has been driven towards better with the unity of a new vision, collaborative structures, and data-informed practice in schools (Hoppey, Black and Mickelson, 2018).

This evolution, which has resulted in inclusive classrooms, now tries to provide a supportive environment for all students, despite the labels they are identified with the use of inclusive pedagogy and education-assistive technology (Elsheikh, 2023).

Nonetheless, inclusive education is not without its challenges; some could be categorized as inadequate funding, policy inconsistencies, and insufficient infrastructure. In addition, a lack of teacher training and resources to manage diverse classrooms could affect their pedagogy. In a social context, stigma and inadequate peer interaction can obstruct the integration of all students. Moreover, the administration and the gaps in leadership could also affect the policies and their implementation. From this point onwards, These would be addressed at each level of the ecological approach.

Child Characteristics (Biosystem)

Many challenges related to K-12 education have been recognized throughout time, and one such issue could be the need to address the diverse learning needs of the children. According to a study conducted in Nepal, Young and Niure (2018) has discovered that many classrooms did not deliberately differentiate the instructions and curriculum, except for only a few situations due to reasons such as lack of resources and knowledge, lack of collaborative efforts by teachers and the deficiency of alternative evaluation techniques. Furthermore,

Rowan et al. (2020) further underscore the thought as they mention that "teachers consistently identify working with "diverse learners as challenging (para.1)" to bring out the need for teachers to reflect and be critical about their knowledge in the subject.

Practices in the classroom (microsystem)

K-12 classroom practices could affect effective inclusivity in education. As per research, Gooding (2016) says that teacher preparation programs do not contain enough training models for the requirements of different learners, and cultural conflict and social inequities continue to influence these classrooms. Adding to this thought, Engelbrecht et al. (2015), along with the attitudes and actions of the teachers, lack of resources, both human and physical space in the classroom, also affect inclusivity. Moreover, understanding the diverse educational needs in a medical-deficit model can also affect effective inclusive classroom practices (Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

Family (mesosystem)

Trustworthy relationships among families and schools are essential to educating diverse students (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 18). Even Corres-Medrano et al. (2022) mention the importance of family participation in school, which contributes to the teaching-learning process. Even though these relationships can support reaching the child's full potential, multiple challenges exist, including language and cultural barriers (when the families are immigrants) and socioeconomic factors (Corres-Medrano et al., 2022).

Another study conducted in the UK by Satherley and Norwich (2022) has recognized that parents look for a caring school atmosphere in special schools rather than inclusive schools, showcasing a need for more understanding in the parents.

Social policies (exosystem)

Many countries tend to consider and implement social policies to promote inclusive education. Canada began by including persons with disabilities in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1985. Apart from that, multiple provincial acts were introduced to support this legislation, while provinces such as New Brunswick mandated inclusive education as the primary approach for all children. These policies aim to ensure the inclusivity of children in education with the availability of necessary support and adequate resources, despite their abilities (Sokal & Katz, 2015).

However, there are multiple challenges in the implementation of these policies. One of the significant issues that goes against the inclusion policies is the "pull-out" program, where the students are separated from the regular classrooms to receive special education services. Further, the need for more consideration towards consistently managing these legislations and policies to make children more inclusive outside academic settings is a notable issue that needs addressing. In the classroom, the teachers may need more training to practice these social policies (Sokal & Katz, 2015).

In addition, significant funding required for resources could be identified as a major issue, which can be emphasized by the references in the BCTF Research report by Rozworski (2018), focusing on the research funding gaps in BC.

"For years, British Columbia has been allocating far less money for special education to school districts than districts have been spending on special education. Meaningful inclusion for all students requires a broad array of supports—specialist teachers, educational assistants, learning resources, specialized equipment and more. There in turn require adequate financial resources."

(Rozworski, 2018, para. 1)

The report by Rozworski (2018) further shows that in 2016-17, the Ministry of Education's funding for special education only covered 58% of school districts' spending, a

\$328 million shortfall. From 2007 to 2017, the gap between funding and spending has been even more prominent (para. 2). In their research, Whitley, Klan, and D'Agostino (2020) have realized that these limited perspectives on funding for inclusive education are remarkably consistent among provinces and that even the media articles have emphasized the need for increased funding.

Culture (macrosystem)

In Sabbarwal's (2016) book review, the influence of cultural beliefs, values, and practices on inclusive education is discussed in detail, focusing on its importance in promoting understanding and acceptance while addressing the existing challenges. Sabbarwal (2016) mentions that cultural beliefs and attitudes towards disability can lead to the exclusion of diverse groups of students due to the priority given to academic achievements. This can be further aggravated by the language barriers students from diverse backgrounds face.

Challenges to inclusive in the K-12 education in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan K-12 education system may have similar challenges to the global challenges brought above. The findings of a study conducted by Indrarathne (2019) on dyslexic students in Sri Lanka have revealed that along with the negative attitudes of certain teachers, there are rigid examinations, less flexible curriculum, and certain negative socio-cultural ideologies that affect the inclusivity of students in education. As a former Sri Lankan teacher in the K-12 sector, I have yet to receive formal training on inclusive education. The curriculum is not shaped according to the diverse needs of children. Moreover, many people in the country assume that children with diverse needs should attend special schools rather than receive mainstream education. In another study on PE teachers in Sri Lanka, Nanayakkara (2021) realized that the authorities do not provide enough support for disability-focused training in in-service teacher education, which hinders inclusivity, mainly in physical education classes. Even though many strategies might be discussed to alleviate this situation,

Abeywickrama et al. (2013) points out that the current inclusivity practices in Sri Lanka are far from global standards.

Integrative Strategies for Enhancing Inclusive Education

As realized by the challenges in this paper, it would be appropriate to address them according to an ecological framework to address each layer of child's inclusive education. Most importantly, providing a child in the biosystem with properly created individualized education plans (IEPs) and differentiated instruction to address the student's unique needs would be necessary (Evans, Gable and Habib, 2021).

In the microsystem, teachers need to be provided with inclusive and cultural education techniques, both prior to the service, especially in the areas of social justice issues and cultural proficiency (Gooding, 2016), and as ongoing professional development programs, as it can allow the educators to handle the diverse needs of the students in their respective classrooms (Lancaster, 2014; Evans, Gable and Habib, 2021). Lancaster (2014) also suggests that the collaborative problem-solving approach could improve instruction quality in inclusive settings.

When discussing collaborations, the family can build trusting relationships with the schools through effective communication, respect, and commitment at the mesosystem level, enhancing every child's educational experience (Haines et al., 2015).

Even though the challenges at the exosystem need much priority, it might be the most challenging level to change. However, physical, financial, and human resources allocation and necessary policy changes, possibly at district levels, may help address the issues in a diverse classroom and curriculum (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

Finally, promoting cultural inclusivity within the classroom and accommodating the widespread attitudes of people might be challenging to encounter. Nonetheless, as suggested

by the study conducted by Kumari (2022), it is understood that in broader cultural contexts, inclusive education must be recognized as a right for all learners, irrespective of their backgrounds or abilities.

In conclusion, the challenges of inclusive education in K-12 can be provided with solutions to a certain level in an ecological approach. This should involve tailored educational strategies, teacher training, family engagement, policy reform, and a culture of inclusivity to create an adequately holistic approach to inclusivity in the K-12 sector in practice.

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