

Ivana D. RISTIĆ<sup>1</sup>  
Jasmina E. KOVAČEVIĆ<sup>2</sup>  
Gorana M. STARIJAŠ<sup>3</sup>

## PATHWAYS TOWARD SUSTAINABLE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – AN ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

**Abstract:** Inclusive education faces a variety of challenges that require a deep understanding and comprehensive approach to be addressed effectively. The primary goal of inclusive education is to provide equal opportunities for all students, including those with developmental disabilities or other learning difficulties. Research in this field highlights significant progress in the implementation of inclusive practices, while simultaneously revealing numerous persistent barriers. Among these challenges are the lack of adequate teacher training, limited resources, and resistance within local communities. This paper aims to offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing these obstacles, with an emphasis on the factors that support the successful implementation of inclusive educational practices. The analysis is based on studies retrieved from databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scribd, and PubMed, prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles over conference abstracts. The examined issues include contemporary barriers to inclusive education such as limited resources, insufficient teacher competencies, stigmatization, policy gaps, low levels of parental involvement, systemic inconsistencies, and challenges in implementing flexible curricula and inclusive assessment strategies. At the same time, the paper identifies strategies with strong potential for improvement, including professional development for teachers, curriculum adaptation, enhanced collaboration between teachers and parents, and active community involvement in the educational process. The findings provide a thorough understanding of inclusive education, addressing both the institutional and psychosocial factors essential for effective student support. The analysis also highlights the key skills and competencies teachers need in order to implement inclusive methods successfully. Finally, it underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and the necessity of systemic support to ensure the sustainability of inclusive education.

**Keywords:** *inclusive education, teacher professional development, systemic support.*

### INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is one of the main directions of modern global education policy in the 21st century. It is based on the belief that all children, regardless of their individual differences, have the right to equal

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<sup>1</sup>[ivana.ristic@pr.ac.rs](mailto:ivana.ristic@pr.ac.rs)

This paper is part of the research conducted within the internal macro project IMP 003 *Enhancing Professional Competencies of Preschool and Primary School Teachers in Contemporary Educational Contexts*, implemented by the Teacher Education Faculty in Prizren–Leposavić, University of Priština – Kosovska Mitrovica.

<sup>2</sup>[kovacjasmina@gmail.com](mailto:kovacjasmina@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>[gorana.starijas@uf.bg.ac.rs](mailto:gorana.starijas@uf.bg.ac.rs)

access to quality education. This approach requires transforming the educational system so that it can respond to the needs of every child. It includes children with developmental disabilities, marginalized groups, and those from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). Although inclusion is widely accepted in both theory and policy, its practical implementation still faces many barriers. These obstacles range from structural and institutional to pedagogical and psychological (Florian & Spratt, 2019; Schuelka, Johnstone, Thomas, & Artiles, 2019; Gorard, Siddiqui, & See, 2022). Common challenges include inadequate teacher training, lack of school resources, weak policy support, and resistance within communities (Curran Mansouri et al., 2024; Hart, 2022; Ristić & Kovačević, 2022). Studies show that successful inclusion depends on institutional support, a multidisciplinary approach, and the involvement of all stakeholders. These include teachers, support professionals, students, parents, and the wider community (Pinto & Lúcio, 2021; Arduin, 2022; Vuković, Ristić, & Čalasan, 2024). Sustainability also relies on shared values and the ability of education systems to adapt to different needs and contexts (UNESCO, 2020; OECD 2023). Despite numerous efforts at the international and national levels, such as the Salamanca Statement, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the 2030 Agenda, the implementation of inclusive education, remains limited and inconsistent (Schuelka et al., 2019; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). The lack of clear implementation guidelines, the rigidity of existing structures, and limited political will continue to slow down progress. Therefore, a systematic analysis of these challenges is necessary, along with the identification of key factors that support effective and lasting inclusion.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to provide an holistic framework for examining barriers and identifying pathways toward sustainable inclusive education. The study is based on a review of relevant academic literature, to identify key challenges and enabling factors for the long-term implementation of inclusive practices.

The review was conducted using databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scribd, and PubMed. These were chosen for their wide coverage of education, pedagogy, inclusion and social sciences. Initially, 62 papers were reviewed. From this sample, 42 were selected based on the following criteria: published between 2010 and 2024; peer-reviewed journal articles; written in English or Serbian; focused on inclusive education, challenges, best practices, teacher support, and institutional

barriers; available in full-text format. Conference abstracts, presentations, and non-peer-reviewed reports were excluded. Search terms included: *inclusive education, inclusive practices, barriers to inclusion, sustainable education, teacher professional development and inclusion, educational policy and inclusion, and equity in education*. The selected studies were first grouped by recurring themes. A thematic analysis was then conducted. It led to the classification of findings into three main dimensions: *Systemic and structural challenges in implementing inclusive education, The role of teachers, including their competencies, attitudes, and support needs* and *Support factors and contextual conditions that foster sustainable inclusive practices*. As part of this review paper, relevant international reports and documents addressing inclusive education and digital equity were analyzed, including publications by the European Commission (2020), UNESCO (2020) and the OECD (2022; 2023), in order to gain insight into contemporary policies, challenges, and recommendations in the field of inclusive education at both the global and European levels.

Although inclusive education is promoted in theory and educational policy, its full and lasting implementation in practice remains not only an educational but also a societal challenge. Research points to various institutional, pedagogical, and social barriers, while to a lesser extent highlighting support mechanisms that can strengthen inclusion. Therefore, the starting point for analysis in this paper is based on the following research questions: What are the main systemic and structural challenges in implementing inclusive education? What is the role of teachers, and what professional support do they most often need? Which contextual and institutional factors support sustainable inclusive practices?

## **THEMATIC SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *Systemic and Structural Challenges in Inclusive Education*

In the literature review, fifteen analyzed studies focus on systemic and structural barriers to sustainable inclusive education. Although some progress has been made at the level of educational policies, recent research shows that many challenges still persist. Among them are outdated legal frameworks, inadequate allocation of resources, the digital divide, and weak intersectoral cooperation (Curran Mansouri et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2020; European Agency, 2022; Pinto & Lúcio, 2021). One of the most frequently reported problems is the gap between legal provisions and everyday school practice. Although many systems formally support

inclusion, curricula and the organization of teaching often remain oriented toward academic achievement. Such an approach leaves little room for respecting the individual characteristics and needs of each student (Schuelka et al., 2019; Pinto & Lúcio, 2021), and inclusive education is frequently reduced to the mere physical presence of students in classrooms, without providing the necessary support for their meaningful participation. Pinto and Lúcio (2021) emphasize that inclusion should not be seen only as a legal or administrative procedure, but as a matter of social justice. Hart (2022) adds that genuine inclusion requires a transformation of educational values and assessment systems. Between 2020 and 2023, several studies pointed to a lack of human and logistical resources. Schools often lack teaching assistants, adapted materials, and multidisciplinary teams (European Agency, 2022). Rural areas are especially affected, with high staff turnover and a shortage of specialists such as speech therapists, special education teachers and psychologists. Even in economically developed countries, increased investment does not necessarily ensure successful inclusion, as without targeted funding aligned with inclusive measures, tangible results are lacking (Yenduri et al., 2023). Many systems still allocate equal resources per student, regardless of the complexity of their needs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenge of digitalization in education became even more pronounced. Arduin (2022) notes that online learning often deepened educational inequalities. Students with developmental disabilities were particularly affected. Problems included a lack of devices, insufficiently trained teachers, and limited opportunities for interaction. Although digital tools have potential, they were most often introduced without adequate planning (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2020; Arduin, 2022; Lytvynova&Demeshkant, 2022). In many cases, instead of narrowing gaps, technology further widened them, especially in areas with poor infrastructure.

The literature also points to a persistent lack of collaboration between sectors. Schools often function in isolation, without systematic coordination with health and social services. In many countries, local mechanisms to support intersectoral service integration do not exist (Gorard et al., 2022; Schuelka et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Although intersectoral cooperation is frequently mentioned in policies, in practice, schools are mostly left to cope on their own.

This analysis shows that research papers primarily highlight the complexity of systemic obstacles. While inclusion is promoted in theory, it is most often realized in an educational context marked by financial, staffing, and organizational constraints, which make it an unsustainable concept (Curran Mansouri et al., 2024). Therefore, a shift in perspective is

needed, one that frames inclusion as a shared social responsibility, not merely a task of educational institutions. Still, most studies remain at the level of identifying and describing problems, and rarely offer concrete tools for the implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of inclusive policies and practices. In this regard, there is a noticeable lack of micro-level case studies based on everyday inclusive educational practice in schools and preschools. Furthermore, the digital dimension of inclusion is still insufficiently theorized and explored. For that reason, the critique of the current system should be used to promote concrete proposals that would transform inclusion into both a value and a lived educational practice. This means not only asking what the barriers are, but also how systems can be redesigned to promote equity, flexibility, and collective responsibility.

### *The Role of Teachers and Pedagogical Practice in Inclusive Education*

Teachers are widely recognized as key actors in inclusive education. However, their role often reflects the existing gap between the goals of educational policy and the everyday realities of classroom practice. Fourteen analyzed studies examine various aspects of teacher involvement, including their competencies, attitudes, training, and teaching methods. Despite growing policy-level support for inclusive education, many teachers still lack the time, resources, and professional assistance needed to respond to the needs of diverse student populations (Schuelka et al., 2019; Pinto & Lúcio, 2021; European Agency, 2022).

One of the common criticisms in the literature is the insufficient preparation of teachers during initial education. In many education systems, inclusive pedagogy is only superficially addressed, through elective courses or short training programs. This leaves future teachers without a strong theoretical and practical foundation (UNESCO, 2020; European Agency, 2022; Curran Mansouri et al., 2024). As a result, many feel unprepared to work with students who have developmental, speech and language, or learning difficulties. On the other hand, new forms of continuous professional development are emerging, such as mentoring, school-based workshops, and intersectoral cooperation. However, their implementation is inconsistent and often depends on individual initiative or the local context. Arduin (2022) and Salas-Pilco (2022) observe that teachers involved in community-based programs often demonstrate greater confidence and flexibility.

In addition, teacher attitudes represent another key factor. Eight studies emphasize that personal beliefs significantly influence teachers' readiness to adopt and apply inclusive methods (Schuelka et al., 2019; Pinto & Lúcio, 2021; Hart, 2022). Teachers who view inclusion as a core

value rather than a burden are more likely to adapt instruction, encourage collaboration, and respect diversity. In contrast, when support is lacking, some teachers engage in only formal inclusion, which exists in official documents and pedagogical records but not in actual practice (Yenduri et al., 2023).

The literature also describes various pedagogical strategies used in inclusive education. Eleven studies mention approaches such as cooperative learning, visual and multisensory aids, individualized education plans, co-teaching and formative assessment. Florian and Spratt (2019) promote the concept of inclusive pedagogy, which involves planning lessons from the outset to accommodate all students. In this model, diversity is not treated as an exception but as the starting point (Pinto & Lúcio, 2021). Nevertheless, consistent application of such methods remains challenging. Obstacles include large class sizes, weak school leadership, and negative attitudes among staff (European Agency, 2022; Vuković et al., 2024).

Another important issue is teacher well-being. Six studies link teachers' emotional resilience to the availability of professional support and the overall quality of instruction (UNESCO, 2020; Arduin, 2022; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022). In situations where teachers feel supported by colleagues and school leadership, they cope with stress more effectively and remain motivated. Conversely, feelings of isolation and excessive workload often lead to burnout, which can reduce their willingness to experiment and innovate. These studies clearly show that teacher engagement in inclusion is a highly complex process. Thus, initial education, competencies, and support are important, but not sufficient on their own. Inclusion is shaped by a range of factors such as school culture, leadership, teamwork, and systemic recognition of the teacher's role. This challenges policies that continue to reduce inclusion to pedagogical competencies or individual responsibility. A broader, participatory model is needed, one in which teachers are seen as equal and respected actors in the creation of inclusive environments, not merely as implementers. Therefore, future research should focus on how schools and education systems can better support inclusive teaching. This includes long-term evaluations of professional development programs, leadership practices, and teachers' real-life experiences. Most importantly, teachers and their perspectives must be included in education policy, as their insights are essential not only for the relevance and success of reforms, but also for preserving the professional dignity of those who implement inclusive education on a daily basis.

### *Support Factors and Contexts Enabling the Sustainability of Inclusive Practices*

An increasing number of studies emphasize that inclusive education cannot be fully understood or effectively implemented without taking into account the broader social and cultural context. Studies from the period 2019 to 2024 indicate that sustainable inclusion is not solely a matter of pedagogy but requires strong and coordinated support from families, communities, and public institutions (Curran Mansouri et al., 2024; European Agency, 2022; Schuelka et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

One of the key elements is the school inclusion team, typically composed of teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, special educators and teaching assistants. Nine out of thirteen analyzed studies show that schools with functional support teams are more effective in meeting students' needs, apply more flexible teaching strategies and foster stronger collaboration (European Agency, 2022; Pinto & Lúcio, 2021; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022). However, in many schools, these teams exist only formally, with unclear roles, insufficient staffing and weak administrative support. Arduin (2022) emphasizes that the gap between declarative and real inclusion often depends precisely on the presence and effectiveness of such teams.

The family and the local community also play a key role, but their involvement is often informal and fragmented. Seven studies indicate that parental engagement depends more on the initiative of individual staff members than on systematic school policies (Gorard et al., 2022; Schuelka et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Positive school practices include parent workshops, joint planning of individualized education plans, and schools functioning as community centers, as is the case in Finland and Portugal (Yenduri et al., 2023). However, some parents of children without developmental difficulties show resistance, which points to the need for broader public education and the cultivation of a culture of empathy (Hart, 2022; Pinto & Lúcio, 2021). In addition to schools and families, sustainable inclusion also depends on cooperation with other sectors. Eight studies highlight the importance of partnerships with social services, healthcare institutions, cultural organizations, and local governments (European Agency, 2022; UNESCO, 2020). However, such cooperation is often symbolic and lacking concrete coordination mechanisms. Administrative barriers and the absence of operational procedures hinder joint action. As a result, schools frequently lack support in areas such as early intervention, mental health and dropout prevention (Lytvynova & Demeshkant, 2022).

Furthermore, the school climate and dominant social values shape how inclusion is implemented in practice. Six studies link the success of

inclusion to school culture. Schools that promote competitiveness and selectivity tend to exclude diversity more often, while those that foster cooperation, emotional learning, and social responsibility provide greater support to all students (Florian & Spratt, 2019; Vuković et al., 2024). Moreover, cultural context plays an important role: in societies where diversity is valued, inclusion is more naturally embedded in daily teaching practices (Ristić et al., 2021). In this light, inclusion is not only an educational reform but also a broader cultural shift.

Thus, the sustainability of inclusion depends on the synergy between school resources, intersectoral collaboration, and community engagement. However, research shows that these efforts are often fragmented. Schools, and particularly teachers, bear the greatest burden. In order to overcome this imbalance, inclusion must be redefined as a shared social responsibility. Clear frameworks and adequate resources are needed at all levels. New research directions should focus on examining the long-term impact of local collaboration, developing indicators for evaluating intersectoral support, and amplifying the voices that are rarely heard, especially those of students and families. Accordingly, all key stakeholders should reflect and act not only in terms of what support exists, but also who defines it, who benefits from it, and under what conditions it truly matters to those most affected by exclusion.

## CONCLUSION

Inclusive education should be understood not only as an educational and pedagogical effort, but also as a broader social responsibility. It goes beyond instructional practice and reflects wider societal structures and norms. In line with the research questions that guided the review and analysis of findings, several key conclusions can be drawn. First, systemic challenges remain the primary barrier to effective inclusion. Although policy frameworks promote inclusive education, many schools continue to operate with insufficient staffing, inadequate funding, and weak intersectoral collaboration. The digital divide, further exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, has deepened educational inequalities, particularly in underdeveloped areas (Arduin, 2022). Second, teachers still play a central role, but their success in inclusive classrooms depends on the quality of their initial education, continuous professional support, and the institutional climate in which they work (Florian & Spratt, 2019; Schuelka et al., 2019). In addition, inclusive teaching requires not only skills and knowledge, but also empathy, teamwork, and professional well-being (Arduin, 2022; Vuković, Ristić&Ćalasan, 2024). Third, sustainable

inclusion is only possible through a coordinated support network. Schools must have functional inclusion teams, partnerships with families, and collaboration with social and health services. Without this infrastructure, inclusion often depends on the efforts of a few individuals and remains fragile (Pinto & Lúcio, 2021; Schuelka et al., 2019).

To improve inclusive education, several priority actions are proposed. First and foremost, educational institutions must receive greater institutional support: more professional staff, adequate funding, and student support teams (European Agency, 2022). In addition, it is necessary to reform initial teacher education so that inclusive pedagogy becomes an integral part of core curricula (UNESCO, 2020; Florian & Spratt, 2019). Equally important is in-service teacher training, which should be continuous, practice-based, and collaborative (Arduin, 2022), as well as monitoring systems for inclusive practices, which should include measurable indicators and incorporate the perspectives of students and parents (Curran Mansouri et al., 2024). Furthermore, intersectoral collaboration must be institutionalized, and inclusive values should be promoted through public information and engagement campaigns (UNESCO, 2020).

At the same time, it is necessary to better understand how inclusive models function in rural areas and schools with limited resources. Future research should focus on the experiences of students and parents, a deeper analysis of cultural factors that shape attitudes toward inclusion, and the role of digital pedagogy, with a critical approach to both its accessibility and pedagogical value. In addition, conducting longitudinal evaluations of teacher education programs would be highly valuable, as such studies exist but remain scarce.

Viewed as a whole, inclusive education is widely accepted in discourse, but remains inconsistently implemented in practice. Teachers continue to be the main drivers of inclusion, often without sufficient systemic support. For inclusion to move beyond rhetoric, it must be grounded in concrete, evidence-based reforms. These reforms should amplify the voices of those most affected, students, families and educators. Ultimately, inclusion is not a fixed model, but a dynamic process and an inclusive school is one that evolves. Therefore, the success and sustainability of inclusive education depend on systemic engagement, intersectoral cooperation, and a shared social commitment to justice and educational equity.

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## ПРАВЦИ КА ОДРЖИВОМ ИНКЛУЗИВНОМ ОБРАЗОВАЊУ – АНАЛИЗА ИЗАЗОВА И РЕШЕЊА

**Сажетак:** Различити изазови стоје пред инклузивним образовањем, што захтева дубоко разумевање и свеобухватан приступ како би се они ефикасно решавали. Основна сврха инклузивног образовања је да пружи једнаке шансе свим ученицима, укључујући и оне који имају сметње у развоју или друге развојне потешкоће. Истраживања из ове области указују на значајан напредак у примени инклузивних пракси, али истовремено разоткривају бројне препреке које и даље постоје. Међу овим изазовима су недостатак адекватне обуке наставника, ограничени ресурси и отпор из самих заједница. Овај рад има за циљ да понуди свеобухватни оквир за анализу тих препрека, са нагласком на факторе који подржавају успешну примену инклузивних образовних пракси. У анализи су коришћене базе података GoogleScholar, ResearchGate, Scribd и PubMed, искључујући апстрактне са конференција и дајући предност пуним истраживањима из научних часописа. Проблеми који се разматрају у анализи укључују савремене баријере у инклузивном образовању, попут ограничених ресурса, недостатка потребних вештина наставника, стигматизације, празнина у инклузивним политикама, недовољног ангажовања родитеља, недоследности система и проблема у примени флексибилних наставних планова и инклузивног оцењивања. Истовремено, истакнуте су стратегије које показују потенцијал за напредак, као што су професионални развој наставника, прилагођавање наставних планова, побољшање сарадње наставника и родитеља и активно укључивање заједнице у образовни процес. Резултати истраживања пружају свеобухватно разумевање инклузивног образовања, уз разматрање изазова са којима се суочавају образовне институције, као и психосоцијалних фактора који су кључни за ефикасну подршку ученицима. Анализа такође разматра кључне вештине и карактеристике које наставници треба да поседују како би успешно примењивали инклузивне методе у настави. Преглед такође акценат ставља на значај сарадње различитих стручњака и указује на потребу за системском подршком у циљу обезбеђивања одрживости инклузивног образовања.

**Кључне речи:** инклузивно образовање, стручно усавршавање наставника, системска подршка

