



## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, A BEST PRACTICE, POLICY AND PROVISION IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND SCHOOLS: THE RATIONALE AND CRITIQUE

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### **Abstract:**

The aspiration to inclusive education has increased significantly following the promulgation in 1994 of the Salamanca Statement and more recently the recognition of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusive education is a best practice, policy and provision in education systems and schools. Orientations to inclusive education are important since they shape practice implementation. This paper explores the rationale and critique of inclusive education. Evidentially, the critique professes measures such as evidence-based practice, teacher professional development and effective resourcing as important to enhancing inclusive education. The paper argues that beyond the criticisms, inclusive education remains the best educational alternative for promoting equitable, socially just and value-oriented practice in schools and education systems. It suggests 'accelerated inclusive education' as a best practice for achieving comprehensive inclusion especially for those with disability or marginalised in schools and society. The paper provides some implications for inclusive education practice in developing countries.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, conceptualisation, rationale, critique, practice, schools, education systems

### **1. Introduction**

Inclusive Education (IE) is about our collective responsibility for humanity. It is about the least things we believe in and do in classrooms and schools that give hope and meaning to learners. For some learners, inclusive education is about the opportunity and space not

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only to learn and socialise with others, but for their voices to be heard. Globally, there is increased aspiration to inclusive education following the promulgation of the 1994 Salamanca Statement and more recently the adoption by many states and countries the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Inclusive education is a strategic policy, process and practice ([Ackah-Jnr & Cumming, in press](#)), yet there are different orientations from practitioners and researchers or scholars to its implementation and practice in education systems and schools. Philosophically and practically, IE is broader than mainstreaming and integration, although these practices are fundamental to inclusive education, and are terms often used interchangeably to mean inclusive education. While both mainstreaming and integration are a normalising process concerned with *relocating* students with disability, usually from segregated settings, into fixed educational systems or practices *temporarily*, IE is about changes in such systems and practices that see students with disability as capable learners and permanent members of mainstream education settings.

Educationally, inclusive education aims at expanding and increasing learning, participation, fellowship in school cultures, curricula and communities while reducing exclusion, inequities and other contextual barriers in and within education and social provision for all children regardless of disability and special educational needs or disadvantage. Following extensive periods of exclusion, marginalisation and alienation or discrimination in education and schooling for children especially those with disability, inclusive education is now being implemented as a holistic education to overcome such barriers and to promote inclusive cultures, ethos and practices that create pathways of hope and success for all children. Inclusive education is regarded as an all-encompassing education for learners ([Ackah-Jnr & Cumming, in press](#); [Darragh, 2010](#)). This paper first discusses the conceptualisation of inclusive education. Second there is a review of the rationale of inclusive education. Finally, a discussion of the critique and a case for inclusive education are explored as well as some implications for developing countries.

## 2. Conceptualising Inclusive Education

As an international best policy, practice and provision, how inclusive education is defined *ideally and theoretically* is near-universal acceptance but not practically, and this has implications for schools and teachers especially that implement education policies. [Ackah-Jnr \(2018\)](#) and [Ackah-Jnr and Cumming \(in press\)](#) argue inclusive education is a 'new' catch-term that has varied conceptualisations within national and local contexts, or education systems and schools. Inclusive education is a complex phenomenon ([Cologon, 2014](#); [Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009](#); [Liasidou, 2015](#); [Lindsay, 2007](#); [Mitchell, 2010](#)) and a subject of considerable discourse and contestation in research ([Ackah-Jnr, 2018](#); [Friend & Bursuck, 2006](#); [Lindsay, 2003](#); [Slee, 2013](#)). It is fraught with a myriad of conceptual issues ([Ackah-Jnr, 2018](#); [Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010](#); [Liasidou, 2015](#)), which account for tensions or misunderstandings in practice.

Research identifies that narrow conceptions of IE are related to the placement of some specific categories of individuals e.g. those with disabilities and others experiencing forms of disadvantage in regular schools. There are broader embrative ideas of IE ([Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012](#)) which generally indicates that IE refers not only to children with SEN or disabilities ([Sapon-Shevin, 2007](#)) but is about all students ([Cologon, 2014](#); [Foreman, 2011](#); [Slee, 2013](#)) or their diversity and difference. Broadly, UNESCO (2009, pp. 8-9) sees IE as: *“process of addressing and responding to the diversity in needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion in education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all.”*

In this paper, I argue that because those with disability are impacted more by effects of disabling conditions and disadvantages, in almost all contexts they are usually *identifiable* candidates for purposeful intervention programs or attract an induced gaze for IE. Hence, definitions focusing on disability are necessarily not an attempt to water down the spirit and letter of IE as an educational emancipatory and social transformational practice ([Liasidou, 2015](#)), but this signals that to promote the principles of equity and social justice in education, some children who are contextually or naturally ‘disadvantaged’ need to be singled out for more comprehensive and intensive support in order to leverage them or create a level playing field for them to learn and socialise with typically developing children. Following this locus, such children or other disadvantaged ones may need what I term ‘accelerated inclusive education’ since they constitute one of the groups *most* vulnerable to exclusion in education and social settings worldwide.

In their research on *Examining the physical environment of Ghanaian inclusive schools*, [Ackah-Jnr and Danso \(2018\)](#) articulated the crux of holistic inclusive education as liberation, enablement, enhancement, empowerment and contribution: *“the move towards enhanced IE will inadvertently bring aboard the inclusion-ship many diverse learners, liberating, empowering and enabling them to rise and realise their potential, and to make meaningful contributions to self and society generally.”*

Metaphorically inclusive education is likened to a *ship* on the sea ([Ackah-Jnr & Danso, 2018](#)). High and low tides or other incidences impact its journey, but the goal is to get everyone to their destination, no matter how daunting this journey will be for the leaders and the led; its success differs for all players and participants. In this sense, inclusive education rationalises the need to educate all or provide equitable opportunities for everyone to realise their potential, irrespective of contextual and external forces; so it challenges the notion of business as usual for schools globally ([Slee, 2013](#)).

### 3. Rationale Inclusive Education

Human rights, social cohesion and reducing ill-effects of segregation, ethical imperative and cost-effectiveness are prominent arguments that have established the rationale for IE ([Armstrong et al., 2010](#); [Darragh, 2010](#); [Friend & Bursuck, 2006](#); [Hodkinson & Vickerman,](#)

2009; [Lindsay, 2007](#); [McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westing, 2013](#); [Mitchell, 2010](#); [Peters, 2007](#); [Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2013](#)). These are leading arguments supporting the desirability of IE in many countries and educational systems and schools worldwide.

### 3.1 Human Rights Imperative

Human rights are the most expressed position and case-making for inclusive education globally for approbating education and social opportunities for all children as enshrined in national and local policies ([Ackah-Jnr & Cumming, In press](#)). The universal right of all individuals to education is the most fundamental rationale and argument for IE ([Mitchell, 2010](#); [Peters, 2007](#)). Human rights for IE were first articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), and subsequently in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006). As an example, Article 26 of the UDHR states “everyone has the right to education for the full development of their potential”. The CRC (1989) also proclaims the right to education—Article 28(1a) states inter alia: “*States Parties recognise the right of the child to education, provided on the basis of equal opportunity*”. Article 23 also stresses the need for special care and support for education of the child with a disability, designed so that there is equal opportunity and access to facilitate development and active participation in the community. While both the UDHR and CRC acknowledge the right of all persons to education, Article 24 of the 2006 CRPD specifically advocates for IE (Article 24(1), emphasis added):

*“States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education; an inclusive education system at all levels devoid of discrimination and provided on equal opportunity is a vehicle to realising this right. Such a system [inclusive education] is effective to develop the full human potential and personality, sense of dignity and promote social participation.”*

The human rights argument aims to ensure children with disability are included in mainstream or same education settings and have appropriate and productive education.

### 3.2 Social Cohesion and Reducing Ill-Effects of Segregation

Inclusive education is further argued on the basis that exclusionary practices are morally unacceptable, as separate is not equal ([Heward, 2013](#)). Hence, IE counters the ill-effects of segregation such as stigmatisation and prejudices on individuals and groups within society ([Ackah-Jnr, 2010](#); [Okyere & Adams, 2003](#)). [Lindsay \(2007\)](#) argues segregated special education is discriminatory and compromises children’s rights, or isolates children with disability from typically developing peers, mainstream curricula, and educational practices. Inclusive practice, therefore, has the potential to reduce fear, build friendship, respect and understanding, and fosters in learners better ways to learn, play

and live together ([Sapon-Shevin, 2007](#)). These are essential for developing social cohesion ([Peters, 2007](#)) and reducing ‘othering’ tendencies that plaque practice and tend to impact the self-esteem and confidence of children, especially those with disability.

### 3.3 Ethical/Moral Argument

Inclusive education is justified as a strong ethical imperative to educate all children ([Darragh, 2010](#)). Developing inclusive, equitable education that embraces the strengths and learning requirements of children, including those with disability ([Darragh, 2010](#); [Deiner, 2013](#)), is ethically justified and righteous ([Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009](#)). Children with disability are first and foremost children, like other children ([Darragh, 2010](#)). Inclusive education ensures children with disability participate, learn and thrive together with other children who have a variety of abilities, interests and cultural backgrounds ([Sapon-Shevin, 2007](#)). It is unethical to separate children with disability from IE settings that have natural experiences for enhancing learning, playing and developing together for all children.

### 3.4 Economic Justification

From an economic perspective, IE is argued to improve human capital development and labour market participation ([World Health Organization, 2011](#)). Through IE, the platform for human resource development widens due to access to quality education and equal opportunity for all ([Peters, 2007](#)). IE enhances the acquisition of skills and competencies that increase the productivity of all individuals and society. [Turnbull et al. \(2013\)](#) state that IE promotes the economic self-sufficiency of persons with disability through their engagement in income-oriented work. Holistic human resource development ensures labour market participation by people with diverse backgrounds.

[Peters \(2007\)](#) argues that within a globalised context, research has articulated IE as cost-efficient and cost-effective. IE is cost-effective as it offers savings or lower costs through the establishment and maintenance of schools that educate all children together than the establishment of complex system of different types of schools for different groups of children ([Armstrong et al., 2010](#); [UNESCO, 2008, 2009](#)), and cost-efficient as it maximises the use of such learning environments and resources (Peters, 2007a).

## 4. Critique of Inclusive Education

Despite strong arguments for the rationale and benefits of IE, it has also been critiqued as an ineffective or disadvantageous practice ([Armstrong et al., 2010](#); [Heward, 2013](#)) and at best underpinned by a zeitgeist ideology ([Kavale & Mostert, 2003](#)). The critique is usually a pitch of special education against inclusive education: Some researchers claim that special education has produced a large but relatively diffuse data, contributing to improved interventions for students with disability, but this seems to be overshadowed by the powerful tensions of full IE, which is “*materially impacting the field of special education*” ([Kavale & Mostert, 2003, p. 191](#)). As an example, some argue that special

education, defined as an individually planned, specialised, intensive and goal-oriented instruction ([Heward, 2013](#)) provides a safety net for regular education and specialised services for children with disability. Thus, IE in a regular class may not be ideal for all children with disability, as it is often not “individualised” or “structured” as in a special education class, and is contrary to the tenets of least restrictive environment and free appropriate education (e.g., [Heward, 2013](#); [Kavale & Forness, 2000](#)). Inclusion thus has created an ideological divide in the special education domain, and the word *inclusion* is likely to engender fervent debate ([Kavale & Forness, 2000](#)) in the education arena.

Research demonstrates that some students with disability do not attain expected social outcomes in inclusive settings ([Kavale & Mostert, 2003](#); [Lindsay, 2007](#); [McLeskey & Waldron, 2011](#)). Simply placing students with disability in general classrooms does not improve social skills, or lead to appropriate behaviour or socially acceptance by teachers or peers without disabilities ([Cook, Klein, & Tessier, 2008](#)). Inclusion may produce negative outcomes and interactions with peers characterised by teasing, negative comments, staring, and social isolation ([Leyser & Kirk, 2011](#); [Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008](#); [Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme, 2002](#)) and bullying ([Frederickson, 2010](#)).

Additional research evidence indicates that some students with disability do not attain expected academic progress in inclusive settings, hence the effectiveness of IE is contested ([Lindsay, 2007](#); [McLeskey & Waldron, 2011](#)). For instance, [Lindsay \(2007\)](#) asserts that the evidence reflects an inadequate endorsement of the positive effects of IE. In an international review of IE or mainstreaming evidence for child outcomes and processes, Lindsay examined 14 comparative outcome studies of children with some form of disability, selecting the 14 studies from 1,373 using a broad categorisation criterion of “effectiveness”. Nine studies compared the performance of children with disability in different settings, while five compared the outcomes of children with disability and typically developing children in the same mainstream schools. The nature and age of children with disability varied, and their ages ranged from preschool/kindergarten to 17-year-olds. Most of the studies measured social, emotional or behavioural and academic outcomes, but others focused only on social factors such as self-concept. The results indicated that children with disability and typically developing children achieved marginally positive and comparable outcomes, but interaction effects such as age coverage, type and severity of disability, and methods of inclusion were found to be important factors that enhanced IE. The research also identified processes that facilitate IE, including enhanced teacher practice and attitudes, and teaching assistants. The study recommended examination of moderators and mediators affecting outcomes since they support children’s rights to inclusion, rather than evidence of optimal practice ([Lindsay, 2007](#)). Arguments in support of IE need to be articulated from both human rights and empirical research evidence of effectiveness.

Contributing further to debates opposed to IE outcomes attained by students with disability, the efficacy and/or effectiveness of *full* IE, in their article entitled *River of Ideology, Islands of Evidence*, [Kavale and Mostert \(2003\)](#) assert strongly that the IE movement “*appears permeated by radicalism, rejecting the empirical in favour of the non-*

*epistemic and postmodern*" (p.191). These researchers claim there is a neglect of empirical evidence based on the efficacy of *full* IE by some inclusionists. In this regard, the IE ideology, which has inundated policy and practice disproportionately to its claims of efficacy, has become an ideological on-rushing river, bypassing significant islands of contradictory evidence. Full IE encompasses "*rigid moral role and exclusionist doctrine, resulting in the promulgation of ideas richly endowed with piety and reverence to propagandise the real world of teachers, parents, and students in special education, spawning predictable consequences for constructing and disseminating knowledge*" ([Kavale & Mostert, 2003, p. 194](#)). Therefore, for [Kavale and Mostert \(2003\)](#), IE should instead adopt less-ideologically-driven approaches to educating students with disabilities.

Other arguments raised against the effectiveness of IE by ([Kavale & Mostert, 2003](#)) reflect similar challenges to IE identified in research (Ackah-Jnr, 2010; Lindsay, 2007). For Kavale and Mostert (2002), from a *practical perspective*, a significant part of special education processes and practices are enmeshed in the beliefs and actions of general education; hence in an integrated system, special education does not act independently as a separate system, but interdependently, and thus a conduit for an enhanced education system. Next, *attitudes* about integration/inclusion are multidimensional and certainly not overwhelmingly positive, which may account for failed mainstreaming/inclusion policies. For example, general education teachers demonstrated certain reluctance about inclusion that countered policy changes towards increased IE of students with disability; *peers* exhibited a lack of acceptance of students with disability; *parents* had mixed attitudes towards IE; and *administrators/principals* lacked knowledge about students with disability and inclusion. In addition, *beliefs and actions*, complemented with contextual realities, resulted in mixed assessed academic outcomes of IE. *Socially*, IE continues to provide negative consequences for students with disability, while teachers *do not have the skill and ability* to include students with disability in inclusive settings ([Kavale & Mostert, 2003](#)).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss the rationale and critique of IE. As a concept IE, it is considered a multidimensional approach whose centrality is about all students, although students with disability are often the point of focus in many countries. While a universalised definition of IE is elusive, there are evolving definitions aimed at promoting best practices that support the diverse needs of children or privilege them with opportunities to enhance their functioning, development and growth ([Ackah-Jnr, 2018](#)).

The review further shows that the combined rationale and critique of IE provides an index for improving inclusive practice in education systems and schools. It is clear that arguments critiquing IE appear to water down the spirit of inclusive practice, however, like many other researchers (e.g., [Foreman, 2011](#); [Lindsay, 2007](#); [Mitchell, 2010](#); [Sapon-Shevin, 2003](#)), [Kavale and Mostert \(2003, p. 203\)](#) affirm that IE or "*full* inclusion

may be viewed as a good thing (that is just, essential, democratic, liberating), though *reality* paints a less sanguine picture about the general education classroom being the *sole placement* option for educating students with disability". Implicitly, if inclusionists give credence to educating students with disability in least restrictive environment, as opposed to general classroom-only education, and recognise the role of empirical evidence, then IE will not be exclusionary and segregationist. As [Kavale and Forness \(2000, p. 289\)](#) concludes, there is "*ideological and political support*" for IE, though not all students with disability benefit from such practice. This is a truism in contexts of *unprepared* education systems and schools, implying IE requires transformative changes to make it work for all.

Notwithstanding the contending views about IE nexus, several researchers (e.g., [McLeskey et al., 2013](#)) argue that negative effects identified result from poor practice or implementation of IE programs or quality of teaching or lack of resources (Ackah-Jnr, 2018), rather than the concept of IE itself, given the challenges that IE can create. When teachers' concerns are addressed, IE programs can be efficacious and successful ([Ackah-Jnr, 2010](#); [Friend & Bursuck, 2006](#); [Lindsay, 2007](#)). For example, teacher preparedness and professional development are a crucial ingredient to overcoming resistance and resistivities to IE ([Ackah-Jnr & UDAH, 2019](#)). According to other researchers, scaffolding, individualisation and differentiation (e.g., [Darragh, 2010](#); [Tomlinson, 2014](#)) and evidence-based practices use are at the core of meaningful IE ([Deiner, 2013](#)). Transforming IE practices, augmented with effective use of available resources—the stock, supplies and sources—act as wheels, levers and drivers or oilers—can enhance IE (Ackah-Jnr, 2018). Resourcing schools strengthens the capacity and motivation of teachers to support and enhance children's participation, engagement and learning. This indicates that many contextual or influencing factors conspire to advance IE practice.

Significantly, IE is identified as a rationale practice for promoting the equalisation of educational and social opportunities for all children, based on several supporting arguments, aside from moral grounds ([Cologon, 2014](#); [Turnbull et al., 2013](#)). Arguments pertaining to the desirability of IE garnered from empirical research on IE outcomes. Evidence attests that IE benefits children with and without disability, teachers, parents and families, and society ([Foreman, 2011](#); [Friend & Bursuck, 2006](#); [McLeskey et al., 2013](#); [Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2012](#)). Thus the move to more IE should not be misconstrued as an ideo-pedagogical contest between special and IE, igniting tensions in our collective attempts to educate all students with disability and disadvantage, but rather arguments be grounded in what teachers and other educators *do* to make IE happen, when exclusion becomes a predisposition, making students with disability to often 'struggle' to maximise their educational and social rights. Inclusive education is not a pitch against special education; a rehash evident in educational literature and research, but IE is an approach advocated for, based on its desirability and empirical viability for most students with disability, if not all, and for the common good of society. Inclusive education attempts to humanise educational and social opportunities for all children. As [Kavale and Forness \(2000, p. 287\)](#) re-echoed unequivocally, "*inclusion appears to be not*



*something that simply happens but rather something that requires careful thought and preparation”, and “when inclusion is deemed appropriate, it is implemented with proper attitudes, accommodations, and adaptations in place”.*

Essentially, arguments against IE may be unending, but they are a necessary good that provide a mirror for refocusing or refining practice, thinking and attitudes. Differently stated, I argue, these arguments offer a reflective tool for making evaluative judgement and analysis of how the efficacy of IE can be improved despite the challenges. Inclusive education, philosophically and practically, aims to meet the educational, personal and social needs of all children, especially those with disability after many historic years of exclusion and alienation where such individuals were barely catered for or left to their fate. Simply, what is required are ways of improving its effectiveness. But overall, IE is a favoured practice as it expands the idea of social justice, equity and inclusive society although it is not absolved from challenges. Therefore, while criticisms and perceived benefits of IE exist, and factors that may affect success should be examined, as well as the need for more empirical evidence use to articulate the effectiveness of IE, research critiquing IE is insufficient to reverse the overall positive benefits found and attributed to IE. Inclusive education is an evolutionary practice or work in progress aimed at becoming better. The potency and success of IE will therefore require broad and more collective and transformative efforts such as connective and innovative dialogue and contributions from all stakeholder interests to cushion and scaffold the process and practice.

## **6. Implications for Developing Countries**

There are several policy and practice implications from this review for developing countries, including Ghana and other sub-Saharan African countries. First, there is a cloud of definitional uncertainty, contestation and dividing discourse about IE that shapes practice locally and internationally. Evolving definitions may never end but they should support the spirit and letter of IE. Therefore, educational systems and schools need to formulate clear, ‘working’ policy definition(s) to guide IE and to prevent arbitrariness, or discretionary practices, and to minimise tensions and contestations from teachers, education officials, policy-makers, and parents. Such a definition needs to be based on both internal and external contextual factors, so that with acceptance, all education stakeholders can collaboratively support IE ([Ackah-Jnr & Cumming, In press](#)).

Second, IE requires resources or effective re-sourcing to avoid practice becoming more rhetoric or challenging (Ackah-Jnr, 2018; Ackah-Jnr & Fluckiger, 2019). Lack of resources and their effective utilisation has been identified as a significant barrier to IE. Funding constraints impact inclusive practice ([Ackah-Jnr, 2018](#); [Barrett, 2014](#)). Varied resources including quality teacher training and agency (Ackah-Jnr & Udah, 2019), in addition to innovativeness and resourcefulness of schools and teachers or reallocating or repurposing of resources are thus critical ([Ackah-Jnr, 2018](#); [Barrett, 2014](#)). For Ackah-Jnr (2018; p. 215), IE *“offers educational, social, political and economic incentives, and is*

*fundamental to lifelong learning, education and development, but without resources, can there be meaningful practice? Implementing quality and equitable inclusive education will require adequate and sustained resources”.*

Thirdly, based on contextual factors, including resource availability and country-specific characteristics, there will always be variations in the approach to IE. This will determine who is in and not in inclusive or mainstream schools. Considering local forces of schools or the education system, IE needs to be customised to avoid wholesale importation of policies that may counter practice in unique contexts. The practice of IE must be a project that is filtered through with local contextual epistemologies and moderated by external factors and best evidence. Although there are no limits to those included, efforts should be geared to providing enhanced services to limit the number of groups of children excluded from mainstream settings. In this case, advances to IE should not be mechanistic and ‘radical’ to eliminate segregated arrangements that traditionally support certain groups of children.

It is important to also consider ‘accelerated’ inclusive education for *certain groups* of children who are contextually or historically disadvantaged, including those with disabilities. In some traditional societies, such children are more disadvantaged; hence it is prudent they are selected and given more enhanced education and social services to enable them to overcome such barriers. Ensuring this would rather act as a means for providing fair and equitable opportunities to ‘quicken’ their participation and success in schools. Doing this would make IE systems more responsive and reasonable.

Finally, ongoing local research that identifies best practices and conditions that enable IE needs to be the bedrock of any inclusive program. Research must be conducted to also evaluate program effectiveness and challenges to practice. Such research outcomes should be appropriately disseminated to IE stakeholders or used as training points in professional development programs for teachers. Teacher education experts in IE need to collaborate with education officials and teachers and other practitioners to identify contextually specific problems to IE and assist in finding solutions to enhance practice.

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