



INCLUSION POLICIES IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION OVER THE PAST DECADE: A POLICY-ORIENTED NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract:

Inclusive education has become a central priority within the educational agenda of the European Union over the past decade. Influenced by international human rights frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), European educational systems have progressively shifted from segregated and integration-based models toward broader inclusion-oriented approaches. This narrative review examines the evolution of inclusion policies across EU educational systems between 2015 and 2025. The review synthesizes policy documents, European Commission reports, research literature, and comparative educational studies focusing on disability, social inclusion, migrant education, equity, digital accessibility, teacher preparation, and systemic reform. Findings indicate that although significant progress has occurred in legislative harmonization, accessibility frameworks, and inclusive pedagogies, considerable disparities remain among Member States regarding implementation, funding, teacher preparedness, and equitable participation. The review further highlights the growing emphasis on whole-school approaches, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), digital inclusion, and intersectional understandings of educational disadvantage. Persistent barriers include inadequate teacher training, insufficient interdisciplinary support, and structural inequalities affecting marginalized groups. The article concludes that the future of inclusive education in Europe depends on systemic transformation rather than isolated interventions, requiring coordinated policy alignment, sustainable funding, and culturally responsive pedagogies.

Keywords: inclusive education, European Union, educational policy, disability, equity, educational systems, special education, social inclusion

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has progressively evolved into one of the most influential educational paradigms within international and European educational policy during the twenty-first century. Over the past decade, particularly, the European Union (EU) has increasingly positioned educational inclusion at the center of broader social, democratic, and human rights agendas, recognizing that equitable access to quality education constitutes both a fundamental right and a prerequisite for social cohesion, economic participation, and democratic citizenship (European Commission, 2020). Inclusive education is no longer understood merely as the physical placement of students with disabilities within mainstream schools; rather, it represents a systemic transformation of educational structures, cultures, policies, and pedagogical practices aimed at ensuring meaningful participation and learning opportunities for all students regardless of disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, migration status, language, gender identity, religion, or other forms of diversity (Slee, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Historically, educational systems across Europe were predominantly characterized by segregated or dual-track structures, where students identified with disabilities or learning difficulties were educated separately in special schools or specialized classrooms (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). During the late twentieth century, many European countries gradually adopted integration-oriented approaches that promoted the placement of some students with disabilities within mainstream educational environments. However, integration models often maintained the expectation that learners themselves should adapt to existing school structures, curricula, and pedagogical norms (Ainscow, 2020). In contrast, contemporary inclusion frameworks emphasize that educational systems themselves must adapt to learner diversity through flexible pedagogies, accessible curricula, differentiated instruction, and systemic support structures (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

A major catalyst for this transition toward inclusion was the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006, particularly Article 24, which established inclusive education as a legally protected human right (United Nations, 2006). The ratification of the CRPD by both the European Union and its Member States substantially influenced educational policymaking throughout Europe during the past decade. The CRPD Committee's General Comment No. 4 further clarified that inclusive education involves comprehensive systemic reform rather than partial integration or coexistence within mainstream settings (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). Consequently, educational inclusion became increasingly associated with social justice, equity, participation, accessibility, and democratic accountability within European educational discourse (Kefallinou *et al.*, 2020). Within the European Union, inclusive education policies have been strongly connected to broader educational modernization agendas. Strategic frameworks such as Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020), the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Education Area initiative emphasized equal educational

opportunities, lifelong learning, and social inclusion as central European priorities (Council of the European Union, 2015; European Commission, 2017). These frameworks promoted educational systems capable of responding effectively to increasing social diversity, migration flows, digital transformation, and persistent educational inequalities. The EU increasingly conceptualized inclusion not solely as a special education issue but as a broader challenge involving educational quality, participation, and democratic resilience (European Commission, 2023). During the past decade, European educational systems have experienced substantial demographic, social, and technological transformations that intensified the importance of inclusive policies. Increased migration and refugee movements following geopolitical instability significantly diversified European classrooms, creating new educational demands associated with multilingualism, intercultural education, and social integration (Cefai *et al.*, 2021). Simultaneously, socioeconomic inequalities, educational disadvantage, and concerns regarding social exclusion became increasingly prominent within European educational policy discussions. Particular attention has been directed toward vulnerable student populations including Roma students, refugee learners, migrant children, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and learners with disabilities or special educational needs (European Commission, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic represented another critical turning point for inclusive education policy across the European Union. School closures and the rapid transition toward digital and remote learning environments exposed profound inequalities in access to educational resources, digital infrastructure, assistive technologies, and family support systems (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2020). Students with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately affected by disruptions in educational provision, further intensifying discussions surrounding digital inclusion, educational accessibility, and systemic resilience. Consequently, European educational policies increasingly emphasized accessible digital learning environments, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), inclusive educational technologies, and flexible pedagogical approaches capable of accommodating learner diversity under varying educational conditions (Meyer *et al.*, 2014). Another major development during the past decade has been the growing adoption of whole-school approaches to inclusion. Rather than conceptualizing inclusion as the sole responsibility of special educators or support staff, contemporary European frameworks increasingly emphasize collaborative institutional cultures involving teachers, school leaders, families, multidisciplinary teams, and local communities (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusive schools are therefore understood not merely as educational settings that enroll diverse learners but as organizations committed to participation, belonging, equity, and learner-centered educational practices. This shift has also reinforced the importance of teacher professional development, inclusive leadership, differentiated instruction, and collaborative pedagogical models (Florian & Camedda, 2020). Despite substantial policy progress, however, significant implementation challenges persist across EU Member States. Research consistently demonstrates considerable disparities between policy rhetoric and educational practice

(Ebersold *et al.*, 2019). While some countries, particularly within Northern Europe, have developed relatively inclusive educational systems emphasizing support within mainstream settings, other Member States continue to maintain extensive segregated special education structures. Differences in educational funding, teacher preparation, institutional culture, legislative implementation, and social attitudes contribute to highly uneven inclusion outcomes across Europe (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], 2022).

Teacher preparedness remains one of the most frequently identified barriers to effective inclusion implementation. Many educators report insufficient training regarding inclusive pedagogies, differentiated instruction, classroom management in diverse settings, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Sharma *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, concerns regarding workload, lack of specialist support, large class sizes, and limited resources frequently undermine inclusive educational efforts. These challenges illustrate that inclusion cannot be achieved solely through legislative reforms but requires sustained structural investment and systemic educational transformation (Slee, 2018). At the same time, contemporary inclusion discourse increasingly adopts intersectional perspectives acknowledging that educational exclusion often results from overlapping forms of marginalization rather than singular categories of disadvantage (Artiles, 2019). Students may simultaneously experience exclusion associated with disability, poverty, migration status, ethnicity, language barriers, or gender-related inequalities. Consequently, modern European inclusion policies increasingly emphasize equity-oriented educational systems capable of addressing diverse and intersecting learner needs through flexible and culturally responsive educational practices (Messiou, 2017).

Furthermore, recent European educational policy discussions increasingly highlight the role of inclusive education in promoting democratic values, social participation, and community cohesion. Following rising concerns regarding social polarization, discrimination, and exclusion across Europe, inclusive schools are increasingly viewed as essential democratic institutions fostering respect for diversity, intercultural dialogue, and social participation (European Union, 2015). Educational inclusion is therefore closely connected not only to academic achievement but also to broader societal goals concerning equality, citizenship, and social sustainability. Within this evolving policy landscape, the present narrative review examines the development of inclusion policies within educational systems across the European Union during the period 2015–2025. The review aims to synthesize contemporary literature, institutional reports, and policy frameworks in order to explore the evolution of European inclusion agendas, identify major themes shaping educational reform, examine implementation challenges, and discuss emerging trends influencing the future of inclusive education within Europe. By critically analyzing policy developments and research evidence across Member States, this review seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions concerning the possibilities and limitations of inclusive educational transformation in the European context.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education has emerged as one of the most influential educational paradigms within contemporary international educational discourse, reflecting broader commitments to equity, accessibility, participation, and social justice. Over recent decades, the conceptualization of inclusion has evolved substantially, moving beyond narrowly defined special education frameworks toward broader systemic understandings of educational diversity and democratic participation (Slee, 2018). The literature consistently demonstrates that inclusive education is no longer interpreted solely as the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, but rather as a comprehensive process of transforming educational systems, institutional cultures, curricula, and pedagogical practices in ways that support the participation and learning of all students (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Early discussions surrounding inclusive education were strongly connected to critiques of segregated educational systems. Historically, students with disabilities or learning difficulties were frequently educated within separate institutional settings, often isolated from mainstream educational environments (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). During the late twentieth century, integration-oriented educational reforms sought to increase the participation of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. However, integration models often maintained assimilationist assumptions, expecting learners to adapt to pre-existing educational structures rather than encouraging schools themselves to accommodate learner diversity (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Contemporary inclusion frameworks reject this approach and instead emphasize systemic educational transformation based on accessibility, flexibility, participation, and institutional responsibility (Slee, 2018). A major influence on the international development of inclusive education policy has been the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly Article 24, which established inclusive education as a legally protected human right (United Nations, 2006).

The CRPD significantly reshaped educational policy discourse by framing exclusionary educational practices as violations of human rights and emphasizing the obligation of educational systems to ensure equitable participation for all learners. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) further clarified through General Comment No. 4 that inclusive education requires systemic reform extending beyond partial integration or physical placement within mainstream settings. According to this framework, educational systems must eliminate structural barriers and ensure accessible, equitable, and participatory learning environments for all students. Within the European context, inclusive education has become increasingly associated with broader educational modernization and social cohesion agendas. European educational policies during the last decade have strongly emphasized educational equity, participation, democratic citizenship, and social inclusion through strategic frameworks such as Education and Training 2020, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Education Area initiatives (Council of the European Union, 2015; European Commission,

2017; European Commission, 2020). These frameworks conceptualize inclusion not solely as a disability-related issue but as a broader challenge concerning educational quality, social participation, and democratic resilience within increasingly diverse societies (European Commission, 2023). The literature additionally demonstrates that inclusive education within Europe is increasingly informed by multidimensional and intersectional perspectives. Artiles (2019) argued that educational exclusion frequently emerges through overlapping forms of social disadvantage associated with disability, ethnicity, migration status, language diversity, and socioeconomic inequality. Similarly, Messiou (2017) emphasized that inclusion research should move beyond narrowly defined categories of educational need and instead focus on identifying and addressing broader processes of marginalization and exclusion within educational systems. These perspectives have contributed to expanding inclusion discourse beyond disability-centered approaches toward broader equity-oriented educational frameworks. Research examining inclusive pedagogy has further contributed to contemporary understandings of educational inclusion. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) proposed that inclusive pedagogy involves extending what is ordinarily available to all learners rather than creating separate educational experiences for particular groups of students. Inclusive pedagogy therefore emphasizes flexibility, participation, and learner diversity as normal dimensions of educational practice. Florian and Spratt (2013) further developed a framework for interrogating inclusive practice that focuses on teachers' beliefs, professional knowledge, and pedagogical decision-making within diverse classroom environments. These perspectives challenge traditional deficit-oriented educational models by emphasizing teacher responsiveness, learner variability, and collaborative participation. Teacher education and professional preparedness have also emerged as central themes within the literature on inclusive education. Numerous studies indicate that effective inclusion depends substantially on teachers' competencies, beliefs, and confidence regarding diverse learner needs (Sharma *et al.*, 2016). Florian and Camedda (2020) argued that teacher education programs must move beyond traditional special education categorizations and instead prepare educators to work effectively with learner diversity within mainstream classrooms. Similarly, Pantić and Florian (2015) conceptualized teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice, emphasizing the importance of critical reflection, collaborative practice, and equity-oriented professional identities.

Whole-school approaches to inclusion represent another major theme within the reviewed literature. Ainscow (2020) emphasized that inclusion cannot be achieved solely through isolated classroom interventions but instead requires institutional cultures characterized by collaboration, participation, shared responsibility, and inclusive leadership. Anderson *et al.* (2014) similarly conceptualized inclusive education through an ecological framework recognizing the interconnected relationships among school structures, policies, pedagogies, and community contexts. Research increasingly demonstrates that inclusive schools are characterized not only by the presence of diverse learners but also by institutional commitments to belonging, participation, and equity.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has become particularly influential within contemporary inclusion discourse. Meyer *et al.* (2014) described UDL as a framework promoting flexible curricula, multimodal instruction, and accessible learning environments capable of accommodating learner variability from the outset. Rather than relying exclusively on individualized accommodations, UDL seeks to reduce educational barriers proactively through accessible educational design. Contemporary European educational policies increasingly emphasize UDL principles because they align closely with broader inclusion goals concerning accessibility, participation, and learner-centered educational environments. The growing role of digital technologies within inclusive education has also received increasing scholarly attention, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Di Pietro *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that school closures and remote learning environments exposed substantial inequalities associated with digital access, assistive technologies, and educational support systems. Students with disabilities and socioeconomically disadvantaged learners experienced disproportionate barriers during periods of remote instruction, highlighting the importance of digital accessibility within contemporary educational systems. OECD (2020) similarly emphasized that educational digitalization must be accompanied by equitable access to technological infrastructure and inclusive pedagogical practices in order to avoid intensifying educational inequalities. European educational agencies and international organizations have also contributed significantly to contemporary inclusion discourse. Reports produced by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2017, 2021, 2022) consistently emphasize the importance of systemic policy coordination, inclusive leadership, teacher professional development, and equitable resource allocation. The Agency additionally highlights the need for inclusive educational systems capable of supporting participation, wellbeing, learner voice, and accessibility within mainstream educational settings. UNESCO (2020) further reinforced these priorities by conceptualizing inclusion as a foundational principle for equitable and sustainable educational systems globally.

Research examining national implementation practices across Europe demonstrates substantial variation among educational systems. Nilholm (2021) argued that despite increasing international consensus regarding inclusive education principles, practical implementation remains highly uneven due to differences in governance structures, funding models, institutional traditions, and cultural attitudes toward diversity. Some countries, particularly within Northern Europe, have developed relatively inclusive systems emphasizing support within mainstream settings, whereas others continue to rely heavily on segregated special education structures (Ebersold *et al.*, 2019). Italy is frequently identified as a leading example of mainstream disability inclusion, while other European educational systems maintain dual-track structures involving separate special schools and specialized classrooms. The literature additionally highlights the relationship between inclusive education and broader democratic and social objectives. The European Union (2015) emphasized that inclusive educational systems contribute to promoting common democratic values, intercultural dialogue,

tolerance, and social participation. Inclusive schools are therefore increasingly conceptualized not only as educational institutions but also as democratic communities fostering belonging, participation, and respect for diversity. Research examining student participation further demonstrates positive associations between inclusive school cultures, emotional wellbeing, learner engagement, and academic participation (Messiou, 2017). Despite substantial conceptual and policy progress, however, the literature consistently identifies significant implementation barriers affecting inclusive education across Europe. Teacher workload, insufficient training, limited interdisciplinary collaboration, lack of specialist support, inaccessible infrastructure, and unequal funding continue to undermine inclusive practices in many educational systems (Sharma *et al.*, 2016; European Parliament, 2017). Furthermore, research suggests that economic austerity and regional inequalities frequently exacerbate disparities in educational access and participation among vulnerable learner populations. The existing literature demonstrates that inclusive education within the European Union has evolved into a complex and multidimensional educational framework closely connected to broader social, political, and human rights agendas. Contemporary inclusion discourse increasingly emphasizes equity, accessibility, participation, learner voice, digital inclusion, and systemic educational transformation. Nevertheless, substantial challenges remain regarding implementation consistency, teacher preparedness, funding equity, and institutional capacity. These findings suggest that inclusive education remains an evolving and unfinished project requiring sustained political commitment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and continued educational reform across European educational systems.

3. Materials and Methods

The present study employed a narrative review methodology to examine the evolution, implementation, and contemporary characteristics of inclusion policies within educational systems across the European Union during the period 2015–2025. Narrative reviews are particularly suitable for synthesizing broad and multidimensional bodies of literature that include theoretical perspectives, policy developments, institutional reports, and empirical research derived from diverse methodological traditions (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Given the complexity of inclusive education as both a policy framework and a pedagogical paradigm, the narrative review approach enabled a comprehensive and interpretive examination of the interconnected social, political, and educational dimensions shaping inclusion policies across European educational systems. Unlike systematic reviews that focus primarily on narrowly defined research questions and highly specific inclusion criteria, narrative reviews allow for broader conceptual exploration and critical synthesis of heterogeneous sources (Green *et al.*, 2006). This approach was considered particularly appropriate because inclusion policies within the European Union involve multiple educational sectors, diverse national policy contexts, varying conceptualizations of inclusion, and different target populations, including

students with disabilities, migrant and refugee learners, students from minority ethnic groups, and learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. Consequently, the review sought not only to summarize existing evidence but also to identify overarching trends, policy transformations, implementation challenges, and emerging directions within European inclusive education discourse.

The review process was conducted between January and April 2026. Literature searches were performed using major academic and institutional databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO. Additional searches were conducted through official institutional repositories and organizational databases associated with the European Commission, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), UNESCO, UNICEF, the OECD, and the European Parliament. These institutional sources were considered essential because European inclusion policy development is strongly influenced by transnational policy frameworks, governmental reports, and strategic educational initiatives that are not always represented adequately within traditional academic databases. The search strategy combined keywords and thematic descriptors associated with inclusive education and European educational policy. Search terms included combinations of “inclusive education,” “educational inclusion,” “European Union,” “special education policy,” “equity in education,” “educational accessibility,” “inclusive pedagogy,” “Universal Design for Learning,” “teacher education for inclusion,” “educational equity,” “disability and education,” “whole-school approaches,” “digital inclusion,” “migration and education,” and “European educational systems.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to refine searches and increase the relevance of retrieved studies. Searches were conducted primarily in English due to the dominance of English-language publications in international educational policy literature; however, selected European institutional documents and policy reports published in other languages but officially translated into English were also included. The temporal focus of the review was intentionally limited to publications produced between 2015 and 2025 in order to capture the most recent decade of educational policy development within the European Union. This period was selected because it reflects a particularly significant phase in the evolution of European inclusive education policies following the widespread implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the expansion of European educational inclusion frameworks connected to ET 2020, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Education Area initiatives. Additionally, this period encompasses major educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly influenced discussions surrounding educational accessibility, digital inclusion, and educational equity across Europe.

The inclusion criteria focused on publications and reports that directly addressed inclusive education policies, implementation practices, educational equity, or systemic inclusion reforms within EU Member States. Both empirical and theoretical studies were included, provided that they contributed substantially to understanding policy

development, educational implementation, teacher preparation, accessibility frameworks, or inclusion-related educational outcomes. Peer-reviewed journal articles, comparative educational studies, governmental reports, institutional policy papers, international organization publications, and educational policy analyses were considered eligible for inclusion. Publications focusing exclusively on non-European contexts or unrelated educational policy domains were excluded unless they provided internationally influential theoretical frameworks directly informing European inclusion discourse. Particular attention was given to studies examining inclusive education from multidimensional and intersectional perspectives. Consequently, the review included literature addressing disability inclusion, migration and refugee education, multicultural and intercultural education, socioeconomic educational inequality, digital accessibility, and teacher professional development. This broader conceptualization reflects contemporary European understandings of inclusion as extending beyond special education and encompassing systemic responses to diverse forms of educational marginalization (Messiou, 2017). Following the initial search process, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the aims of the review. Duplicate records were removed, and full texts of potentially relevant publications were subsequently examined in detail. Sources were evaluated according to their relevance, methodological rigor, conceptual contribution, and connection to European educational systems. Institutional publications from recognized European and international organizations were included due to their significant influence on educational policymaking and implementation across EU Member States. The analytical process involved thematic synthesis and interpretive categorization of the literature. Included studies and policy documents were reviewed repeatedly in order to identify recurring themes, conceptual developments, policy priorities, implementation barriers, and emerging educational trends. Through this iterative process, several central thematic categories emerged, including the transition from integration to inclusion, human rights and CRPD influence, whole-school approaches, Universal Design for Learning, teacher education and professional development, digital inclusion, intersectionality and equity, funding and resource allocation, and systemic educational transformation. Special consideration was also given to cross-national differences among EU Member States. Although the European Union promotes shared educational values and policy priorities, educational governance remains primarily a national responsibility, resulting in considerable variation in implementation practices and institutional structures across countries (Ebersold *et al.*, 2019).

Consequently, the review sought to highlight both converging European trends and persistent disparities in policy enactment among different educational systems. The narrative synthesis additionally incorporated comparative interpretation of policy developments before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This distinction was considered important because the pandemic substantially reshaped educational priorities across Europe, particularly regarding digital accessibility, educational resilience, mental health support, and equitable participation in remote learning environments (Di Pietro *et al.*,

2020). Emerging post-pandemic educational policies were therefore analyzed as part of broader systemic transformations affecting inclusive education throughout the European Union. Although the narrative review methodology allows for comprehensive synthesis and conceptual interpretation, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Narrative reviews are inherently interpretive and do not employ the rigid procedural standardization associated with systematic reviews or meta-analyses. Consequently, some degree of subjectivity may influence the selection and interpretation of literature. Additionally, because the review focused primarily on English-language sources and major European institutional publications, certain national or region-specific perspectives published in local languages may not have been fully represented. Nevertheless, extensive efforts were made to ensure breadth, methodological diversity, and representativeness across the included literature and policy documents. The methodological approach adopted in the present review was designed to provide a broad yet analytically rigorous examination of inclusion policy developments within the European Union during the past decade. By integrating empirical research, theoretical perspectives, and institutional policy frameworks, the review seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive education has evolved within European educational systems and to identify the major opportunities and challenges shaping future policy development.

4. Results

The findings of the present narrative review indicate that inclusion policies within educational systems across the European Union have undergone substantial conceptual, legislative, and structural transformation during the period 2015–2025. Across the reviewed literature and policy documents, inclusive education increasingly emerged as a central dimension of educational quality, democratic participation, social equity, and human rights rather than as a narrowly defined special education initiative. Nevertheless, the analysis also revealed considerable disparities between policy intentions and practical implementation across Member States, highlighting persistent structural, pedagogical, and socioeconomic barriers that continue to affect equitable educational participation. One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed literature was the progressive transition from integration-oriented educational approaches toward broader systemic inclusion frameworks. Earlier educational models across Europe often focused on integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools while maintaining unchanged institutional structures and curricular expectations. In contrast, recent European policy discourse increasingly emphasizes that educational systems themselves must adapt to learner diversity through flexible pedagogies, collaborative practices, accessible curricula, and inclusive school cultures (Ainscow, 2020; EASNIE, 2022). Recent European Agency reports further demonstrate that inclusive education is now conceptualized as a multidimensional systemic process involving governance, quality assurance, participation, accessibility, learner voice, and cross-sector collaboration rather

than merely school placement decisions. The reviewed literature demonstrated that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) continued to exert substantial influence on educational policymaking across Europe throughout the examined decade. Many EU Member States revised educational legislation to align more closely with Article 24 of the CRPD, which frames inclusive education as a fundamental human right. Countries such as Portugal, Italy, Ireland, and Finland were frequently identified as examples of systems implementing more comprehensive inclusion-oriented reforms emphasizing participation within mainstream educational settings (Kefallinou *et al.*, 2020). The literature further indicated that the CRPD shifted policy discourse away from medically oriented models of disability toward social and rights-based understandings emphasizing accessibility, participation, and institutional responsibility (Slee, 2018). However, despite legislative progress, several studies reported that many educational systems continue to operate through hybrid models combining inclusive rhetoric with segregated special education structures, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts (Ebersold *et al.*, 2019).

A major thematic finding concerned the increasing adoption of whole-school approaches to inclusion across European educational systems. The literature consistently emphasized that successful inclusion depends not only on classroom-level interventions but also on institutional cultures characterized by collaboration, shared responsibility, inclusive leadership, family engagement, and interdisciplinary cooperation (Florian & Camedda, 2020). European Commission initiatives and Erasmus+ projects increasingly promoted school-wide inclusion strategies focusing on participation, wellbeing, diversity management, and learner-centered educational environments. Recent European policy guidance additionally highlighted the importance of supportive school climates and mental health promotion, particularly for vulnerable learners and students at risk of educational exclusion. The findings also demonstrated growing emphasis on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and accessibility-centered pedagogical models. Multiple studies identified UDL as one of the most influential conceptual frameworks informing contemporary European inclusion policies because it promotes proactive curriculum design that accommodates learner variability from the outset rather than relying solely on individualized accommodations (Meyer *et al.*, 2014). Educational systems increasingly emphasized flexible teaching strategies, multimodal learning opportunities, accessible assessment procedures, and personalized educational supports. The integration of assistive technologies and accessible digital learning environments also became increasingly central within European educational policy discussions, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2020).

Digital inclusion emerged as one of the most prominent policy developments identified within the reviewed literature. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly exposed educational inequalities associated with access to digital devices, internet connectivity, assistive technologies, and digitally inclusive teaching practices. Students with disabilities, learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, migrant populations, and students residing in rural regions experienced disproportionate barriers

during periods of remote learning (OECD, 2020). As a result, recent European educational strategies increasingly emphasize digital accessibility, inclusive online learning environments, and equitable access to educational technologies. European Commission frameworks now explicitly connect digital transformation with educational inclusion and learner participation. The reviewed evidence further indicated increasing recognition of intersectionality within European inclusion policies. Inclusion is no longer understood exclusively in relation to disability but increasingly encompasses broader forms of educational marginalization associated with migration, ethnicity, poverty, language diversity, refugee status, and social disadvantage (Artiles, 2019). Several European reports emphasized that exclusion often results from overlapping forms of vulnerability rather than isolated categories of disadvantage. Consequently, educational inclusion policies increasingly target broader equity-related priorities involving Roma populations, migrant learners, refugee students, and socially disadvantaged communities. UNESCO and OECD publications similarly emphasized that equitable educational systems must address systemic inequalities and barriers affecting diverse learner populations.

Another important finding concerned the growing emphasis on learner participation and student voice within European inclusion discourse. Contemporary inclusion frameworks increasingly conceptualize learners as active participants in educational decision-making processes rather than passive recipients of support services. Recent European Agency publications highlighted learner participation as a core feature of inclusive educational systems and emphasized the importance of involving students in decisions affecting their educational experiences. Research examining inclusive school cultures further demonstrated that student participation contributes positively to belonging, engagement, emotional wellbeing, and academic motivation (Messiou, 2017). Despite these significant policy advancements, the findings consistently identified substantial implementation challenges across EU Member States. One of the most frequently reported barriers concerned teacher preparedness for inclusive education. Numerous studies indicated that many teachers continue to feel insufficiently trained to address diverse learner needs effectively, particularly regarding differentiated instruction, behavior support, disability inclusion, intercultural education, and collaborative pedagogical practices (Sharma *et al.*, 2016; Florian & Camedda, 2020). Teachers frequently reported concerns associated with increased workload, insufficient classroom support, large class sizes, limited planning time, and inadequate professional development opportunities. These findings suggest that legislative reforms alone are insufficient without sustained investment in teacher education and institutional support structures. The review additionally revealed persistent disparities in funding and resource allocation across European educational systems. While some countries have invested substantially in inclusive support services, accessible infrastructure, multidisciplinary collaboration, and support personnel, others continue to experience shortages in specialist staff, assistive technologies, and inclusive educational resources. Several reports highlighted concerns regarding the impact of austerity measures and

educational budget constraints on inclusive policy implementation (European Parliament, 2017). Furthermore, the literature repeatedly emphasized that unequal regional funding within countries contributes significantly to disparities in educational inclusion outcomes. Recent comparative European studies additionally demonstrated substantial differences in national approaches to financing inclusive education and supporting mainstream schools in accommodating learner diversity.

Cross-national variation represented another major finding throughout the reviewed literature. Although the European Union promotes shared educational values and strategic priorities regarding inclusion, educational governance remains largely under national jurisdiction, resulting in highly diverse implementation practices. Nordic countries, particularly Finland, were frequently identified as examples of systems emphasizing flexible support structures and inclusive pedagogical cultures, whereas other educational systems continue to rely more heavily on segregated special education models (Nilholm, 2021). Italy was consistently highlighted as one of the most advanced examples of disability inclusion within mainstream education, with studies reporting exceptionally high participation rates of students with disabilities in regular classrooms supported through co-teaching and specialized support teacher systems. In contrast, several countries continue to maintain dual-track educational systems where students with disabilities are disproportionately educated in separate settings. The findings also demonstrated increasing emphasis on monitoring, accountability, and data-driven policy development within European inclusion frameworks. Recent European Agency initiatives have focused extensively on developing statistical indicators, monitoring systems, and quality assurance frameworks capable of evaluating inclusion implementation across educational systems. The European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education (EASIE) datasets have become increasingly influential in informing comparative policy analysis and identifying disparities in educational participation among learner populations. These developments indicate a growing recognition that inclusive education requires systematic evaluation mechanisms capable of assessing not only access but also participation, achievement, wellbeing, and educational outcomes. Another significant trend identified within the reviewed literature involved increasing attention to educational leadership and governance within inclusive education systems. Recent European and UNESCO reports emphasized that school leadership plays a crucial role in shaping inclusive school cultures, teacher collaboration, resource allocation, and institutional responsiveness to learner diversity. Inclusive leadership models increasingly prioritize shared decision-making, collaborative professional cultures, and student wellbeing. The literature further indicated that inclusive educational reform is more sustainable when supported by coordinated governance structures and cross-sector collaboration among educational, health, and social service systems.

The review also identified emerging discussions concerning artificial intelligence, assistive technologies, and digitally mediated inclusion. Recent research suggests that AI-supported educational technologies may enhance accessibility, personalized learning, communication supports, and learner participation for students with disabilities and

diverse educational needs. However, studies simultaneously warned that technological innovations may exacerbate existing inequalities if access remains uneven or if digital pedagogies fail to address issues of accessibility and learner autonomy. Consequently, recent European discussions increasingly emphasize ethical, equitable, and accessibility-centered approaches to educational digitalization. Finally, the findings demonstrated that inclusive education within the European Union is increasingly framed as a central component of democratic and socially sustainable educational systems. European policy discourse consistently connected inclusive education with broader goals involving social cohesion, civic participation, mental wellbeing, and democratic citizenship. Inclusive schools are increasingly conceptualized as communities capable of fostering belonging, intercultural understanding, social participation, and respect for diversity. Recent European educational frameworks therefore position inclusion not merely as a compensatory educational strategy but as a foundational principle underlying equitable and democratic educational systems across Europe.

5. Discussion

The findings of the present narrative review demonstrate that inclusion policies within educational systems across the European Union have undergone substantial conceptual and structural transformation during the last decade. Across the reviewed literature, inclusive education increasingly emerged as a multidimensional and rights-based framework associated with educational equity, democratic participation, accessibility, social cohesion, and learner wellbeing rather than as a narrowly defined special education initiative. At the same time, however, the review also revealed persistent tensions between policy aspirations and educational realities, highlighting the complexity of implementing genuinely inclusive systems within diverse national, political, and socioeconomic contexts. One of the most important developments identified in the literature concerns the conceptual transition from integration-oriented approaches toward systemic understandings of inclusion. Earlier educational frameworks frequently focused on placing students with disabilities within mainstream classrooms while leaving institutional structures, curricula, and pedagogical expectations largely unchanged (Slee, 2018). Contemporary European policy discourse increasingly rejects this perspective and instead conceptualizes inclusion as a process of transforming educational systems themselves in order to accommodate learner diversity proactively and equitably (Ainscow, 2020). This shift reflects broader theoretical movements away from deficit-oriented and medically based models of disability toward social and human rights frameworks emphasizing participation, accessibility, and institutional responsibility (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

The strong influence of the CRPD throughout the examined decade further illustrates the growing alignment between educational inclusion and international human rights agendas. The reviewed literature consistently demonstrated that Article 24

of the CRPD significantly reshaped European educational policy by reframing inclusive education as a legal entitlement rather than a discretionary educational provision (Kefallinou *et al.*, 2020). This transformation has important implications because it positions educational exclusion not simply as an administrative or pedagogical issue but as a matter of social justice and democratic equality. Consequently, inclusion policies increasingly emphasize participation, learner dignity, accessibility, and equal opportunities within mainstream educational environments. Nevertheless, the review also indicates that legislative alignment with inclusive principles does not automatically result in effective implementation. Many educational systems continue to exhibit substantial discrepancies between policy rhetoric and classroom practice (Ebersold *et al.*, 2019). Several Member States maintain dual-track educational structures involving segregated special schools or specialized classrooms despite formal commitments to inclusion. This contradiction suggests that educational inclusion is influenced not only by legislation but also by broader cultural, institutional, and economic factors shaping educational systems. Historical traditions of special education, institutional inertia, and societal attitudes toward disability and diversity continue to influence implementation processes across Europe. The findings additionally suggest that inclusion policies are increasingly expanding beyond disability-centered frameworks toward broader understandings of educational equity and intersectionality. Contemporary European inclusion discourse increasingly recognizes that educational exclusion frequently results from overlapping forms of marginalization involving disability, migration, ethnicity, poverty, language barriers, gender inequalities, and social disadvantage (Artiles, 2019). This broader conceptualization reflects significant theoretical progress because it acknowledges that learner identities and educational experiences are multidimensional rather than isolated within singular diagnostic or demographic categories. As a result, inclusion policies increasingly address the needs of migrant learners, refugee populations, Roma students, and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities alongside students with disabilities. The growing emphasis on intersectionality within European educational policy also reflects broader social transformations affecting European societies during the last decade. Increased migration flows, demographic diversification, economic inequalities, and concerns regarding social fragmentation have intensified the need for educational systems capable of supporting diverse learner populations and promoting social cohesion (Cefai *et al.*, 2021). Inclusive education therefore increasingly functions not only as an educational reform strategy but also as a broader social policy mechanism aimed at strengthening democratic participation, intercultural understanding, and community resilience. This broader societal role of inclusive education became particularly visible within recent European policy frameworks connecting inclusion with democratic citizenship, wellbeing, and social sustainability (European Commission, 2023).

Another major theme emerging from the review concerns the growing recognition that inclusion requires whole-school and systemic approaches rather than isolated classroom interventions. The literature consistently demonstrated that successful

inclusion depends on collaborative institutional cultures involving teachers, school leaders, families, multidisciplinary teams, and local communities (Florian & Camedda, 2020). This finding is particularly important because earlier educational reforms often focused narrowly on individual accommodations or specialist support services without addressing broader institutional structures and school cultures. Contemporary European inclusion frameworks increasingly emphasize leadership, participation, collaboration, and institutional climate as central dimensions of inclusive educational systems. The increasing adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated pedagogical frameworks further illustrates the movement toward proactive rather than reactive inclusion models. UDL principles encourage educational systems to design curricula, learning environments, and assessment procedures capable of accommodating learner variability from the outset rather than relying exclusively on individualized adaptations after barriers emerge (Meyer *et al.*, 2014). The findings suggest that this approach has become particularly influential within European inclusion discourse because it aligns with broader educational priorities involving flexibility, participation, accessibility, and learner-centered pedagogies. Importantly, UDL also contributes to reducing the stigmatization sometimes associated with individualized accommodations because accessibility becomes embedded within general educational design rather than applied selectively to particular groups of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a particularly significant contextual factor influencing inclusive education policies during the examined period. The reviewed literature demonstrated that the pandemic exposed and intensified pre-existing educational inequalities associated with disability, socioeconomic disadvantage, digital access, and family resources (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2020). Students with disabilities and vulnerable learner populations frequently experienced disproportionate barriers during remote learning periods due to inaccessible digital platforms, insufficient assistive technologies, reduced specialist support, and unequal home learning conditions. These findings reinforce broader concerns regarding the relationship between educational inclusion and digital inequality. At the same time, however, the pandemic also accelerated innovation and policy attention regarding digital inclusion, accessible technologies, and flexible educational delivery models. European educational systems increasingly recognized that digital accessibility constitutes an essential dimension of inclusive education rather than a supplementary technological issue. Consequently, recent European policies place stronger emphasis on accessible online learning environments, assistive educational technologies, and digitally inclusive pedagogical practices (European Commission, 2024). This development may have long-term implications for the future of inclusive education because digital technologies possess substantial potential to support personalized learning, communication accessibility, flexible participation, and learner autonomy when implemented equitably. Despite these positive developments, teacher preparedness remains one of the most persistent and significant challenges identified throughout the reviewed literature. Numerous studies consistently reported that many teachers feel insufficiently prepared to address

increasingly diverse learner needs within inclusive classrooms (Sharma *et al.*, 2016; Florian & Camedda, 2020). Teachers frequently expressed concerns regarding inadequate professional training, lack of interdisciplinary collaboration, limited classroom support, time constraints, and increased workload. These findings are particularly important because teachers represent the central mediators between educational policy and classroom practice. Without sustained investment in teacher education and professional support systems, inclusive policy reforms risk remaining primarily rhetorical rather than transformative. The findings additionally indicate that inclusion requires not only pedagogical change but also substantial structural investment. Effective inclusion depends on accessible infrastructure, specialist support services, assistive technologies, interdisciplinary collaboration, and equitable funding models. However, the literature consistently demonstrated significant disparities in resource allocation across European educational systems (European Parliament, 2017). Countries with stronger welfare systems and sustained educational investment generally demonstrated more developed inclusion practices, whereas systems affected by economic austerity or regional inequalities often experienced greater implementation challenges. These findings highlight the close relationship between inclusive education and broader socioeconomic policy conditions.

Cross-national variation across EU Member States also emerged as a highly significant finding. Although European educational policy increasingly promotes shared values concerning inclusion and equity, implementation remains highly uneven due to differences in governance structures, historical traditions, funding systems, teacher preparation models, and cultural attitudes toward diversity (Nilholm, 2021). This variation suggests that inclusion cannot be understood as a uniform or standardized process across Europe. Rather, inclusive education develops within complex national and local educational ecologies shaped by political priorities, institutional histories, and societal values. The findings also suggest that recent European inclusion discourse increasingly conceptualizes educational participation and learner voice as central dimensions of educational quality. Students are progressively viewed as active participants in educational processes rather than passive recipients of support services (Messiou, 2017). This development reflects broader democratic and child-rights-oriented perspectives emphasizing agency, belonging, and participation. Research reviewed within the present study further demonstrated positive relationships between inclusive school cultures, student participation, emotional wellbeing, and academic engagement. Consequently, inclusion increasingly involves not only physical access to mainstream educational settings but also meaningful social participation and recognition within school communities. Another important implication concerns the expanding role of educational leadership within inclusive systems. The literature increasingly emphasizes that inclusive schools require leadership models capable of fostering collaboration, equity-oriented decision making, teacher support, and inclusive institutional cultures. School leaders play a critical role in shaping organizational priorities, resource allocation, professional learning opportunities, and school climate. Consequently, inclusive

educational reform increasingly depends on leadership preparation and governance structures that prioritize participation, accessibility, and learner wellbeing. The growing discussion surrounding artificial intelligence and educational technologies also represents an important emerging dimension of inclusive education policy. Recent research suggests that AI-supported educational systems may enhance accessibility, communication support, adaptive learning, and personalized instruction for diverse learners. However, the literature simultaneously warns that technological innovation may reproduce or intensify inequalities if access remains uneven or if algorithmic systems fail to address issues of bias, accessibility, and ethical inclusion. Therefore, future European educational policies must ensure that technological transformation remains aligned with equity-oriented and human rights-based inclusion frameworks.

Overall, the findings of the present review indicate that inclusive education within the European Union is increasingly understood as a comprehensive process of systemic educational transformation connected to broader democratic, social, and human rights objectives. However, the review also demonstrates that meaningful inclusion remains an ongoing and unfinished project. Persistent disparities in implementation, funding, teacher preparation, and institutional capacity continue to limit equitable participation for many learners across Europe. Future progress therefore requires sustained political commitment, coordinated cross-sector collaboration, investment in teacher professional development, equitable resource allocation, and continued movement away from deficit-oriented educational models toward flexible and participatory educational systems capable of supporting all learners. Ultimately, the evolution of inclusion policies within the European Union during the past decade reflects broader transformations in how educational systems conceptualize diversity, equity, and educational quality. Inclusion increasingly represents not merely the incorporation of marginalized learners into existing educational structures but the reconstruction of educational systems themselves in ways that promote participation, belonging, accessibility, and democratic equality for all students.

6. Recommendations

The findings of the present narrative review indicate that the advancement of inclusive education within the European Union requires sustained systemic reform extending beyond legislative declarations and symbolic policy commitments. Although substantial progress has been achieved during the past decade regarding educational accessibility, rights-based policy frameworks, and broader understandings of learner diversity, significant disparities continue to affect the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive education across Member States. Consequently, several policy, institutional, and pedagogical recommendations emerge from the reviewed literature.

First, European educational systems should prioritize the development of comprehensive and coherent national inclusion strategies aligned with international human rights frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of

Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Inclusive education policies should move beyond fragmented interventions and instead promote coordinated systemic transformation involving governance structures, curricula, assessment systems, teacher education, school leadership, and support services. National educational reforms should ensure that inclusion becomes embedded within all dimensions of educational planning and quality assurance rather than remaining confined to special education sectors.

Second, greater investment in teacher education and professional development is essential for the successful implementation of inclusive educational practices. The literature consistently demonstrates that many teachers feel insufficiently prepared to address learner diversity within mainstream classrooms. Teacher preparation programs across Europe should therefore integrate inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), intercultural education, collaborative teaching models, classroom management in diverse settings, and disability studies perspectives within both pre-service and in-service professional development. Continuous professional learning opportunities should additionally support teachers in responding effectively to emerging educational challenges associated with migration, multilingualism, digital accessibility, and mental wellbeing.

Third, educational systems should strengthen whole-school approaches to inclusion by promoting collaborative institutional cultures involving school leaders, teachers, families, multidisciplinary professionals, and local communities. Inclusive education should not be conceptualized solely as the responsibility of individual teachers or specialist support staff. Instead, schools should adopt collaborative models emphasizing shared responsibility, learner participation, family engagement, and coordinated interdisciplinary support. Educational leadership preparation programs should similarly prioritize inclusive leadership competencies associated with equity-oriented decision making, collaborative governance, and learner wellbeing.

Fourth, European educational policies should continue expanding accessible and flexible learning environments through the implementation of Universal Design for Learning principles. Educational curricula, assessment systems, teaching materials, and digital learning platforms should be designed proactively in order to reduce barriers to participation for diverse learner populations. UDL-based approaches may contribute significantly to reducing educational exclusion by ensuring that flexibility and accessibility are embedded within mainstream educational design rather than provided solely through individualized accommodations.

Fifth, the findings highlight the urgent importance of strengthening digital inclusion policies across European educational systems. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed substantial inequalities associated with digital access, assistive technologies, and remote learning participation. Future educational reforms should therefore ensure equitable access to digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, assistive technologies, and accessible educational software for all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disabilities. Educational technologies and artificial

intelligence applications should be implemented through ethical, accessibility-centered, and equity-oriented frameworks in order to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities.

Sixth, inclusion policies should increasingly adopt intersectional and culturally responsive approaches capable of addressing overlapping forms of educational marginalization. Educational systems must recognize that exclusion frequently results from the interaction of disability, socioeconomic disadvantage, migration status, ethnicity, language barriers, gender inequalities, and other structural factors. Consequently, inclusive education policies should promote culturally responsive pedagogies, multilingual support systems, anti-discrimination practices, and targeted interventions addressing the needs of migrant learners, refugee students, Roma communities, and other vulnerable populations.

Seventh, European educational systems should strengthen mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, and accountability regarding inclusive education implementation. Policymakers should move beyond measuring physical placement within mainstream schools and instead evaluate broader indicators associated with participation, wellbeing, academic achievement, learner voice, accessibility, and social belonging. Comparative European datasets and quality assurance frameworks may contribute significantly to identifying disparities, informing evidence-based policy development, and supporting continuous educational improvement across Member States.

Eighth, equitable and sustainable funding mechanisms are necessary to support the long-term development of inclusive educational systems. The literature demonstrates that inadequate funding, regional inequalities, shortages of specialist personnel, and insufficient educational resources continue to undermine inclusion efforts in many countries. Governments should therefore invest strategically in accessible infrastructure, multidisciplinary support services, assistive technologies, inclusive educational materials, and teacher support systems. Educational inclusion should be understood as a long-term public investment associated with social cohesion, democratic participation, and educational quality rather than as a temporary compensatory initiative.

Finally, future research should continue examining the effectiveness of inclusive education policies across diverse European contexts using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Additional comparative studies are needed to investigate cross-national implementation differences, learner experiences, teacher perspectives, digital accessibility practices, and the long-term educational outcomes associated with inclusive educational reforms. Particular attention should also be directed toward emerging issues involving artificial intelligence, mental health, post-pandemic educational recovery, and intersectional inequalities within increasingly diverse European educational systems. The advancement of inclusive education within the European Union depends on sustained political commitment, interdisciplinary collaboration, equitable investment, and systemic educational transformation. Future European educational policies should continue promoting educational systems in which diversity is recognized not as a deficit

requiring remediation but as a fundamental characteristic of democratic and equitable learning communities.

6. Conclusions

The present narrative review examined the evolution of inclusion policies within educational systems across the European Union during the period 2015–2025 and highlighted the substantial conceptual, legislative, and structural transformations that have occurred during the past decade. The findings demonstrate that inclusive education has progressively evolved from a narrowly defined special education initiative into a broader rights-based and equity-oriented educational framework associated with democratic participation, accessibility, social justice, and educational quality. One of the central conclusions emerging from the review is that European inclusion policies have increasingly shifted from integration-oriented models toward systemic understandings of inclusion. Contemporary European educational discourse emphasizes that inclusion is not limited to the physical placement of students with disabilities within mainstream schools but instead involves the transformation of educational systems themselves in order to accommodate learner diversity proactively and equitably. Influenced strongly by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), European educational policies increasingly conceptualize inclusion as a fundamental human right requiring institutional accessibility, learner participation, and equitable educational opportunities for all students.

The review additionally demonstrated that inclusion policies within the European Union have expanded considerably beyond disability-focused frameworks. Contemporary inclusion agendas increasingly address broader forms of educational marginalization associated with migration, socioeconomic disadvantage, ethnicity, language diversity, refugee status, and social exclusion. This broader and intersectional understanding reflects growing recognition that educational inequality often results from overlapping structural and social barriers rather than isolated categories of disadvantage. Consequently, inclusive education is increasingly positioned as a central mechanism for promoting social cohesion, democratic citizenship, and equitable participation within increasingly diverse European societies. Another important conclusion concerns the growing emphasis on systemic and whole-school approaches to inclusion. The literature consistently highlighted that effective inclusion depends on collaborative institutional cultures involving teachers, school leaders, families, support professionals, and local communities. Inclusive educational systems therefore require not only legislative reform but also sustained transformation of school cultures, pedagogical practices, leadership models, and governance structures. The increasing adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, learner participation frameworks, and collaborative pedagogical models further illustrates the movement toward proactive and flexible educational systems capable of responding to learner diversity. The findings also revealed that digital inclusion has become a particularly significant dimension of

contemporary European educational policy, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed substantial inequalities related to access to digital technologies, assistive supports, and inclusive online learning environments. As a result, European educational systems increasingly recognize that digital accessibility constitutes an essential component of educational inclusion and equitable participation. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and adaptive learning systems, may offer important opportunities for enhancing accessibility and personalized learning; however, these developments also require careful ethical and equity-oriented implementation in order to avoid reproducing existing inequalities. Despite substantial policy progress, the review identified persistent challenges that continue to limit the realization of genuinely inclusive educational systems across the European Union. Significant disparities remain among Member States regarding funding, teacher preparation, accessibility, support services, and implementation practices. Many educational systems continue to maintain segregated or dual-track structures despite formal commitments to inclusion. Furthermore, teachers frequently report insufficient training, increased workload, and inadequate institutional support for addressing diverse learner needs within inclusive classrooms. These findings suggest that inclusive education cannot be achieved solely through policy declarations or legislative reform but requires sustained structural investment, professional development, and long-term institutional commitment.

The review further demonstrated that inclusive education is closely connected to broader socioeconomic and political conditions. Educational systems characterized by stronger welfare structures, sustained educational investment, and collaborative policy frameworks generally demonstrate more developed inclusive practices. In contrast, economic austerity, regional inequalities, and insufficient institutional coordination often undermine implementation efforts. Consequently, the future success of inclusive education within Europe depends not only on educational reform itself but also on broader commitments to social equity, public investment, and democratic participation. Overall, the findings of the present review suggest that inclusive education within the European Union remains an evolving and unfinished project. Considerable progress has been achieved during the past decade regarding legislative alignment, policy development, accessibility frameworks, and broader conceptual understandings of inclusion. Nevertheless, substantial challenges remain in translating inclusive ideals into consistent educational practice across diverse national contexts. Future progress requires coordinated policy implementation, equitable funding mechanisms, interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusive leadership, and sustained investment in teacher education and support systems. Ultimately, inclusive education within the European Union increasingly represents a broader vision of democratic and equitable education in which diversity is recognized not as a problem requiring remediation but as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary societies and educational communities. The continued advancement of inclusive educational systems therefore depends on the capacity of European educational policies to move beyond symbolic commitments toward

meaningful systemic transformation capable of ensuring participation, belonging, accessibility, and educational opportunity for all learners.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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