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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Geoff Lindsay,
University of Warwick, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Stephen Hay
✉ s.hay@griffith.edu.au

RECEIVED 08 April 2025
ACCEPTED 14 April 2025
PUBLISHED 28 April 2025

CITATION
Hay S, Beamish W and Chambers D (2025)
Editorial: Advancing inclusive education for
students with special educational needs:
rethinking policy and practice.
Front. Educ. 10:1607694.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1607694

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Editorial: Advancing inclusive education for students with special educational needs: rethinking policy and practice

Stephen Hay ^{1*}, Wendi Beamish ¹ and Dianne Chambers ²

¹School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Mt Gravatt, QLD, Australia, ²Center for Special Needs Education Research and Practice (CSNERP), Institute for Diversity and Inclusion, Hiroshima University, Higashihiroshima, Japan

KEYWORDS

inclusive education, inclusive education policy, pedagogical practices, special educational needs, stakeholder engagement

Editorial on the Research Topic

[Advancing inclusive education for students with special educational needs: rethinking policy and practice](#)

This Research Topic offers a timely reflection on inclusive education for students with special educational needs (SEN), commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Salamanca Declaration [[United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\), 1994](#)]. While the Declaration catalyzed a global commitment to inclusive, equitable education, progress toward its realization remains uneven, with disparate policies and practices evident throughout the world. The 10 studies in this Research Topic, though diverse in their aims, methods, and findings, share a common purpose: critically examining persistent challenges while exploring innovative pathways to improving inclusive schooling for this student group across varied national and educational contexts.

The first article by [Liu and Potmesil](#) sets the scene with a review of research on inclusive education for students with SEN using CiteSpace. The review provides a broad, data-driven overview of how the field has evolved over the past decade, identifying major trends, gaps, and future directions. The analysis indicates a primary research focus on education, psychology, and child development while advocating for greater interdisciplinarity. The need for future comparative and cross-national studies to enhance inclusive practices are highlighted.

The next three articles illustrate the critical need to rethink policy and governance in educating students with SEN within inclusive settings. [Cumming et al.](#) examine the contentious debate in Australia regarding the role of special schools vs. full inclusion, a discussion reignited by the divided recommendations of the 2023 Royal Commission. Key issues considered are international agreements, stakeholder perspectives, and the practical challenges of implementing full inclusion in mainstream schools. Rather than framing schooling as a binary choice between special vs. mainstream settings, the authors advocate for strengthening existing processes and practices at system, school, teacher, and family levels to ensure the most supportive educational environment is selected based on individual student need.

Expanding on the theme of inclusive policymaking, [Norwich and Webster](#) present a pilot Citizens' Panel in England that applied deliberative democratic methods to generate policy ideas for more inclusive schooling. The project has two aims: (a) enhancing the participation of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D) in policymaking, and (b) developing practical policy recommendations, primarily focused on broad school improvements with integrated SEN/D considerations. This community-based initiative highlights the potential of deliberative approaches to create more inclusive and representative education policies.

[Beamish et al.](#) shift the focus to the Asia-Pacific in their comparative study of seven jurisdictions, revealing shared challenges to progressing inclusive education in mainstream schools. Their findings identify inconsistent policy guidelines, weak implementation plans, and the pressing need for stronger government and institutional commitment to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Recommendations include locally driven research to inform effective inclusion strategies and a coordinated approach involving action at multiple levels of governance.

Another set of articles examine the pivotal role of schools and teachers in implementing inclusive education. [D'Angelo and Singal](#) explore teachers' perceptions and practices regarding inclusive education for students with diverse learning needs in the Dominican Republic. Their findings highlight how teachers' views of their students shape inclusive practices in classrooms. The importance of equipping teachers with adequate training, pedagogical skills, and a supportive school culture are emphasized.

Extending the discussion to out-of-school settings, [Boström and Elvstrand](#) investigate the extent to which Swedish School-Age Educare Centers (SAEC) support students with SEN. Their study reveals differing perceptions among various professional groups, particularly principals, regarding students who need special support and additional adaptations. Findings also disclosed a scarcity of specific programs for these students, suggesting the need for increased resources, stronger reform prioritization in SAEC, and targeted staff training.

A broader institutional response to inclusion is considered by [Gómez-Domínguez et al.](#) who analyze how schools adapted—or failed to adapt—to the needs of students with SEN during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their bibliometric study highlights key challenges, including limited personalized support and resource accessibility, while also identifying effective strategies such as dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs) and school-family collaboration. The authors argue that the pandemic exacerbated educational inequalities and placed additional emotional burdens on families. They call for proactive policies and greater emphasis on psychological wellbeing in education to foster more inclusive and resilient school systems.

A final set of articles showcase frameworks and resources aimed at better supporting neurodiverse students. [Le Cunff et al.](#) propose a preliminary framework for managing cognitive load in online education for neurodivergent students. This framework emphasizes flexible content formats, reduced environmental distractions, appropriately paced information delivery, clear instructions, accessible support services, and participatory research. A PESTEL

analysis points to external factors affecting the framework's implementation, including resource disparities and policy support. By comparison, [Abd El-Sattar et al.](#) explore the potential of serious games as a participatory research tool for children with autism. Drawing on the authors' prior work, a new theory and framework for game-based skill development to enhance engagement and learning outcomes is detailed. Ethical considerations and copyright aspects are discussed alongside supplementary online materials.

Expanding the discussion beyond learning interventions, [Johnston et al.](#) address the broader issue of school absences among autistic students, proposing a structured, neuro-affirming resource to foster inclusion. Developed collaboratively with stakeholders and rooted in neurodiversity perspectives, the freely available resource moves away from deficit- and reward-based models. It includes key messages, case studies, and a planning framework promoting inclusive practices, parental partnerships, environmental adaptations, and predictable school experiences.

Collectively, the studies presented here highlight both the barriers and opportunities for fostering more inclusive learning environments, offering insights from across the United Kingdom, Europe, Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific. While some articles critically examine existing policies and institutional responses to educating students with SEN, others propose innovative frameworks and pedagogical strategies that can drive meaningful change in practice. Together, they emphasize the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, evidence-informed policymaking, teacher training and support, and inclusive school cultures that value all learners. Future challenges lie not only in developing robust policies and frameworks but in ensuring their effective implementation—one that is responsive to students, teachers, and families. By continuing to rethink policy and practice in light of emerging research and evolving societal needs, we can move closer to truly inclusive education systems for all students.

Author contributions

SH: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. WB: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. DC: Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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