

Global Dialogues in Humanities and Pedagogy

Developing an Inclusive Curriculum Framework for Students with Disabilities in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of contemporary educational policy across Europe, with Spain demonstrating significant commitment to integrating students with disabilities into mainstream educational settings. This study examines the development and implementation of an inclusive curriculum framework designed to support learners with diverse disabilities within Spanish primary and secondary schools. Drawing upon Universal Design for Learning principles and differentiated instruction approaches, this research investigates how curriculum adaptations, pedagogical modifications, and assessment accommodations can create equitable learning opportunities for students with physical, sensory, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. Data collected from twelve schools across Catalonia, Madrid, and Andalusia reveal that effective inclusive curriculum implementation requires comprehensive teacher preparation, collaborative support systems, flexible learning materials, and institutional cultures valuing diversity as educational asset rather than deficit. While Spanish legislation provides strong inclusive education mandates, significant implementation gaps persist regarding resource allocation, specialist support availability, and translation of policy ideals into classroom realities. This research contributes evidence-based recommendations for strengthening

inclusive curriculum frameworks that honor diverse learning needs while maintaining rigorous academic standards within Spain's evolving educational landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The movement toward inclusive education represents a fundamental shift in educational philosophy, rejecting segregated special education models in favor of integrated approaches that educate students with and without disabilities together in mainstream classroom environments. This transformation reflects broader societal recognition of disability rights, influenced by international frameworks including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which articulates education as a fundamental human right that must be accessible to all individuals regardless of disability status. Spain has demonstrated substantial commitment to inclusive education through legislative reforms, policy initiatives, and resource investments aimed at creating educational systems that accommodate diverse learners within general education settings rather than relegating students with disabilities to separate special schools or classrooms (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). According to Ainscow and Miles (2008), inclusive education encompasses more than physical placement of students with disabilities in regular classrooms, instead requiring fundamental reconceptualization of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture to ensure meaningful participation and learning for all students regardless of ability, background, or characteristics.

The Spanish educational context reflects distinctive historical, political, and cultural factors shaping inclusive education development. Spain's transition to democracy following Franco's dictatorship created opportunities for educational reform aligned with European human rights frameworks and progressive pedagogical movements emphasizing equity and social justice. The 1990 General Education System Law (LOGSE) established initial foundations for inclusive education, followed by subsequent reforms including the 2006 Organic Law on Education (LOE) and 2013 law for improving educational quality (LOMCE), each strengthening commitments to educating students with special educational needs in mainstream settings with appropriate supports. However, Spain's decentralized educational governance system grants significant autonomy to autonomous communities, creating regional variation in inclusive education implementation, resource allocation, and service delivery models. Echeita and Ainscow (2011) documented how this decentralization produces both opportunities for innovative local practices and challenges regarding equity across regions, as wealthier autonomous communities often provide more comprehensive inclusive education supports than economically disadvantaged areas.

Curriculum represents the heart of educational practice, encompassing not only formal content standards but also pedagogical approaches, learning materials,

assessment methods, and implicit messages about whose knowledge and ways of learning hold value within educational institutions. Traditional curriculum models often privilege particular forms of knowledge, communication modes, and demonstration methods that advantage students with certain abilities while creating barriers for learners with disabilities. For example, curricula emphasizing rapid information processing disadvantage students with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties, while presentation formats relying exclusively on visual information exclude students with visual impairments, and assessment methods requiring handwritten responses pose challenges for students with physical disabilities affecting fine motor control. Meyer et al. (2014) articulated Universal Design for Learning as framework addressing these curriculum barriers through flexible approaches providing multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement, enabling students with diverse abilities to access content, demonstrate learning, and maintain motivation through pathways aligned with their strengths and needs.

The concept of differentiated instruction offers complementary framework for inclusive curriculum development, emphasizing teachers' responsibility to adapt instruction based on students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Tomlinson (2014) described differentiated instruction as proactive approach to curriculum design that anticipates learner diversity rather than treating variation as exceptional circumstance requiring remedial intervention. This perspective aligns with inclusive education philosophy rejecting deficit models that pathologize disability in favor of approaches recognizing diversity as natural human condition requiring responsive educational practices. However, implementing genuinely differentiated instruction proves challenging, particularly in contexts where teachers receive limited preparation for working with diverse learners, face accountability pressures emphasizing standardized outcomes, and lack time for individualized planning that differentiation demands. Spanish teachers often express commitment to inclusive education ideals while struggling to translate these values into effective classroom practice given competing demands and insufficient support.

Assessment practices constitute critical curriculum component frequently creating barriers to inclusive education when designed around narrow conceptions of competence or limited demonstration modalities. Traditional assessment approaches emphasizing timed written examinations, standardized test formats, and uniform performance criteria often fail to capture capabilities of students with disabilities, leading to inaccurate conclusions about their learning and potential. Thurlow et al. (2008) examined assessment accommodations and modifications enabling students with disabilities to demonstrate knowledge and skills despite functional limitations, distinguishing between accommodations that level the playing field by removing disability-related barriers without changing measured constructs, and modifications that alter what is being assessed to match students' alternative learning goals. Spanish inclusive education policy recognizes assessment accommodation rights, yet implementation varies considerably across schools and

teachers, with some educators providing thoughtful, individualized accommodations while others offer minimal modifications or resist accommodations due to concerns about fairness or maintaining standards.

Collaboration among educators, specialists, families, and students themselves emerges as essential element of effective inclusive curriculum implementation. Inclusive education requires expertise beyond what general education teachers typically possess, necessitating input from special education teachers, therapists, psychologists, and other specialists who contribute specialized knowledge about disability, assistive technology, communication alternatives, and instructional strategies. Villa and Thousand (2005) emphasized that successful inclusive education depends upon collaborative teaming models where professionals share responsibility for all students rather than maintaining traditional divisions where general educators teach students without disabilities while special educators separately serve students with disabilities. Spanish schools employ various collaborative configurations including co-teaching arrangements, specialist support services, and multidisciplinary teams developing individualized education plans, yet collaboration quality varies substantially depending on institutional culture, leadership support, and professional preparation for collaborative practice.

Teacher preparation and ongoing professional development represent critical factors determining inclusive curriculum implementation quality (Muhsyanur Muhsyanur, 2023b). Many practicing teachers in Spain completed pre-service education before inclusive education reforms, receiving limited preparation for working with diverse learners, while even recently trained teachers often report that their preparation programs provided insufficient practical experience with inclusive instruction. Research consistently demonstrates that teacher attitudes, efficacy beliefs, and pedagogical knowledge significantly influence inclusive education outcomes, with teachers who feel unprepared or philosophically opposed to inclusion often providing lower-quality instruction to students with disabilities. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argued that effective teacher preparation for inclusive education requires more than adding special education courses to existing programs, instead demanding fundamental reconceptualization of teaching as inherently involving diverse learners rather than treating disability as specialized domain requiring separate expertise. Spanish teacher education reforms have attempted to strengthen inclusive education preparation, yet gaps persist between policy aspirations and actual practice in preparing educators for curriculum implementation that genuinely serves all students.

METHOD

This research employed participatory action research methodology to develop and evaluate an inclusive curriculum framework collaboratively with educators, students, and families across twelve schools in Spain. Participatory action research, as described by Kemmis et al. (2014), involves practitioners as co-researchers who actively participate in investigating problems within their contexts, developing

interventions addressing identified challenges, implementing and refining these interventions through iterative cycles, and generating knowledge that is both theoretically informed and practically applicable. This methodological approach aligned with inclusive education values emphasizing voice and agency for individuals with disabilities and stakeholders affected by educational practices rather than positioning them as passive research subjects. The participating schools represented diverse contexts including urban and rural settings across Catalonia, Madrid, and Andalusia autonomous communities, varying socioeconomic profiles, and different proportions of students with disabilities spanning intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, physical and sensory impairments, and specific learning difficulties. School selection utilized purposive sampling prioritizing institutions demonstrating commitment to inclusive education while representing varied implementation stages, from schools early in inclusive transformation to those with established inclusive practices seeking refinement.

The research unfolded across three phases over two academic years, beginning with needs assessment and framework development, proceeding through pilot implementation and iterative refinement, and culminating in evaluation of outcomes and sustainability. Data collection employed multiple methods including focus groups with teachers, students with and without disabilities, families, and support staff exploring current practices, challenges, and desired improvements; classroom observations documenting curriculum implementation, instructional strategies, student engagement, and accessibility features; document analysis examining curriculum materials, lesson plans, individualized education plans, and assessment tasks; and collection of student outcome data including academic achievement measures, engagement indicators, and social participation metrics. According to Stringer (2014), action research quality depends upon authentic participation from diverse stakeholders, systematic documentation of processes and outcomes, and practical utility for improving practice within studied contexts. This study pursued these quality markers through establishing collaborative research teams at each school site combining university researchers, school administrators, classroom teachers, special education staff, and family representatives who jointly designed interventions, collected data, analyzed findings, and determined next steps. Regular cross-site meetings enabled sharing of insights, challenges, and innovations across schools while maintaining site-specific adaptations responsive to local contexts and needs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Universal Design Principles in Curriculum Development

The application of Universal Design for Learning principles emerged as foundational strategy for creating accessible curriculum that reduced barriers while maintaining academic rigor and high expectations for all students. Participating schools implemented UDL frameworks emphasizing flexible representation of content through multiple formats including visual, auditory, and tactile modalities;

varied options for student expression and demonstration of learning beyond traditional written responses; and diverse engagement strategies connecting to students' interests, backgrounds, and motivational profiles. Teachers reported that designing curriculum with UDL principles from the outset proved more effective and efficient than retroactively adapting materials for individual students with disabilities, as universally designed lessons benefited all learners including those without identified disabilities who nonetheless possessed diverse learning preferences and needs. One Madrid primary school teacher described how providing graphic organizers, audio recordings, and manipulative materials for a science unit originally intended to support a student with dyslexia actually enhanced understanding for the entire class, with students gravitating toward materials matching their learning preferences.

Implementation of multiple means of representation required substantial redesign of curriculum materials and instructional practices that traditionally relied heavily on text-based resources and lecture-style presentation. Teachers experimented with incorporating images, diagrams, videos, physical demonstrations, and real-world examples alongside written and verbal explanations, enabling students to access content through pathways aligned with their sensory capabilities and cognitive strengths. For students with visual impairments, schools acquired screen readers, braille materials, and tactile graphics; for students with hearing impairments, teachers utilized sign language interpreters, captioned videos, and visual supports; and for students with intellectual disabilities, educators developed simplified text versions, concrete examples, and step-by-step task breakdowns. However, creating these varied representations demanded significant time investment, access to appropriate resources and technologies, and specialized knowledge about accessibility features and alternative formats. Teachers in well-resourced schools with instructional design support created more comprehensive multi-modal materials, while educators lacking such support struggled to move beyond minimal adaptations.

Multiple means of action and expression proved equally important for enabling students with diverse abilities to demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities. Traditional assessment and assignment formats often confounded students' actual understanding with their ability to produce specific response types, such as handwritten essays penalizing students with motor impairments regardless of their conceptual understanding. Participating schools expanded demonstration options to include oral presentations, video projects, artistic representations, physical demonstrations, multiple-choice assessments alongside open-ended responses, collaborative group products, and portfolio documentation of learning over time. One Catalonia secondary school implemented "choice boards" where students selected from multiple assignment options addressing the same learning objectives, enabling students with writing difficulties to demonstrate understanding through alternative formats while providing all students with opportunities to leverage their strengths. Teachers noted that these flexible demonstration options

revealed capabilities of students with disabilities that traditional assessments had masked, leading to revised expectations and appreciation for diverse forms of competence.

Engagement strategies constituted the third UDL pillar, addressing motivation, persistence, and self-regulation dimensions that significantly influence learning outcomes. Teachers implemented various approaches to enhance engagement including connecting content to students' lives and interests, providing authentic learning experiences with real-world relevance, offering choices regarding topics or learning pathways, incorporating collaboration and social learning opportunities, and teaching learning strategies and metacognitive skills explicitly. For students with autism spectrum disorders or attention difficulties, teachers developed visual schedules, clear routines, and structured choice options that provided necessary predictability while accommodating individual preferences. Students with intellectual disabilities benefited from concrete, meaningful learning activities grounded in functional contexts rather than abstract academic exercises disconnected from their lives. However, teachers also identified tensions between engagement-focused practices and curriculum coverage requirements, as authentic, interest-driven learning often demanded more time than traditional instruction methods, creating difficult choices about breadth versus depth and standardized curriculum compliance versus responsive teaching.

Collaborative Support Systems and Role Differentiation

Effective inclusive curriculum implementation required sophisticated collaborative infrastructures bringing together diverse expertise to support students with complex needs within mainstream classroom contexts (Muhsyanur, 2024). The participating schools employed various collaborative models including co-teaching arrangements where general and special education teachers jointly planned and delivered instruction, consultation models where specialists advised classroom teachers and provided indirect support, parallel teaching dividing class into groups for simultaneous instruction, and coordinated services where multiple professionals contributed specialized interventions within integrated frameworks. Teachers consistently emphasized that successful collaboration depended not merely on structural arrangements but on relationship quality, shared philosophical commitments to inclusion, clear role definitions, and sufficient collaborative planning time that school schedules often failed to provide. One Andalusia school established weekly collaborative planning sessions for teams supporting students with significant disabilities, which teachers identified as essential for coordinating approaches, sharing observations, and problem-solving challenges, yet this time commitment required administrators to restructure schedules and justify resource allocation to skeptical education authorities.

The evolution of special educator roles within inclusive contexts emerged as particularly significant theme, reflecting broader tensions regarding expertise, professional identity, and service delivery models. Traditional special education

positioned specialized teachers as primary instructors for students with disabilities in separate settings, possessing distinctive expertise for addressing disability-related learning needs. Inclusive education transforms this role toward collaboration, consultation, and shared responsibility where special educators contribute specialized knowledge while general educators maintain primary instructional responsibility. Some special education teachers in participating schools embraced this collaborative role, describing satisfaction in supporting students within meaningful general education contexts and opportunities to share expertise benefiting broader student populations. However, others expressed professional identity concerns, feeling their specialized expertise was undervalued, experiencing role ambiguity regarding their responsibilities and authority, and worrying about career implications as traditional special education positions diminished. These tensions highlight the need for thoughtful attention to professional roles, explicit recognition of specialist contributions, and career pathway clarity within inclusive educational systems.

Paraeducator or teaching assistant roles presented another collaborative dimension requiring careful consideration, as these support personnel often worked most directly with students with disabilities yet typically possessed limited training and occupied marginal positions within school hierarchies. Participating schools varied considerably regarding paraeducator deployment, with some assigning assistants to individual students with significant support needs, others utilizing them as general classroom supports benefiting all students, and some eliminating one-to-one assignments in favor of collaborative team approaches. Research on paraeducator practices has documented potential problems with over-reliance on untrained assistants for students with greatest needs, inadvertent segregation when students spend most time with paraeducators rather than teachers or peers, and interference with peer relationships and student independence. Several participating schools deliberately restructured paraeducator roles toward supporting whole classes rather than individual students, training assistants in evidence-based practices, and ensuring qualified teachers maintained primary instructional responsibility while paraeducators provided supplementary support. However, these improvements required resources for training, time for supervision and coordination, and willingness to challenge traditional support models.

Family involvement emerged as critical yet often underdeveloped dimension of collaborative inclusive education. Families possessed invaluable knowledge about their children's needs, strengths, communication patterns, and effective supports, yet often felt marginalized from educational decision-making or positioned as passive recipients of professional expertise. Schools implementing more participatory approaches actively solicited family input regarding curriculum adaptations, included families as collaborative team members, provided regular communication about student progress and instructional approaches, and offered family education regarding disabilities, rights, and effective advocacy. One Madrid school established family advisory councils including parents of students with and without disabilities

who provided input on inclusive education policies, participated in professional development activities, and supported other families navigating special education systems. However, genuine family-professional partnership required educators to relinquish some professional authority, value experiential knowledge alongside formal expertise, and invest time in relationship-building and communication that pressured schedules often precluded.

Institutional Barriers and Policy-Practice Gaps

Despite strong legislative frameworks mandating inclusive education in Spain, significant gaps persisted between policy ideals and implementation realities, with multiple institutional barriers constraining schools' capacity to develop and implement genuinely inclusive curricula. Resource constraints emerged as fundamental obstacle, as inclusive education requires substantial investments in personnel, materials, assistive technologies, facility modifications, and professional development that many schools struggled to secure. While Spanish law guarantees necessary supports for students with disabilities, actual resource allocation often fell short of need, with schools reporting insufficient special education staffing, lengthy delays accessing assistive devices, limited funding for curriculum adaptations, and inadequate professional development opportunities. These resource gaps disproportionately affected schools serving economically disadvantaged communities and those in autonomous communities with lower education spending, exacerbating educational inequities rather than ameliorating them through inclusive approaches.

Accountability systems emphasizing standardized test performance created additional tensions with inclusive curriculum implementation, as conventional assessments often failed to capture learning of students with significant disabilities or those pursuing modified curriculum objectives. Teachers described pressure to prioritize test preparation over meaningful learning experiences, narrow curriculum to emphasize tested subjects while marginalizing arts and experiential learning, and focus instructional attention on students near proficiency cut-scores rather than those with greatest needs. Several educators expressed concerns that students with disabilities negatively affected school performance ratings, creating perverse incentives to exclude struggling students from testing or discourage enrollment of students with significant disabilities. While Spanish policy allows assessment exemptions or alternative assessments for some students with disabilities, these provisions proved inconsistently implemented and philosophically controversial, with debates about whether modified standards undermined inclusive education's promise of rigorous instruction for all students or whether refusing accommodations imposed unrealistic expectations ignoring disability-related learning differences.

Professional preparation gaps significantly constrained teachers' capacity to implement inclusive curricula effectively, as many educators reported feeling inadequately prepared for working with diverse learners despite their commitment to inclusive education values. Pre-service teacher education programs in Spain have

expanded inclusive education content, yet practicing teachers often completed preparation before these reforms, receiving minimal training in differentiated instruction, disability awareness, behavior management, or collaboration with specialists. Even recently prepared teachers described their training as primarily theoretical, lacking sufficient practical experience working with students with disabilities in authentic classroom contexts. Professional development opportunities existed through autonomous community education departments and teacher centers, but teachers noted these often consisted of brief workshops providing general information rather than sustained, job-embedded learning supporting actual practice improvement. Schools participating in this research identified ongoing professional development as critical need, requesting sustained support including coaching, collaborative planning assistance, and opportunities to observe and learn from experienced inclusive educators (Muhsyanur, 2023a).

Cultural attitudes and belief systems represented perhaps the most fundamental barriers to inclusive curriculum implementation, as genuine inclusion requires more than technical modifications to instead demand transformation of values, expectations, and assumptions about disability, ability, and educational purpose. Despite official inclusive education policies, deficit perspectives positioning disability as individual pathology requiring remediation rather than as natural human variation requiring responsive environments remained prevalent among some educators, families, and society broadly. Students with disabilities sometimes faced low expectations, segregating practices rationalized as necessary for their success, or exclusion from academic content deemed too difficult in favor of functional life skills curriculum disconnecting them from peers and limiting future opportunities. Several teachers in participating schools initially resisted inclusive curriculum framework, expressing beliefs that students with significant disabilities belonged in separate settings, that inclusion harmed students without disabilities by slowing instruction, or that they lacked expertise for teaching students with diverse needs. Transforming these attitudes required sustained efforts including exposure to successful inclusive practices, opportunities to develop relationships with students with disabilities, examination of bias and assumptions, and philosophical discussions about educational equity and human rights rather than simply mandating compliance with inclusive policies.

CONCLUSION

This investigation of inclusive curriculum framework development in Spanish schools reveals both substantial progress toward inclusive education and persistent challenges requiring continued attention, resources, and systemic transformation. The research demonstrates that implementing genuinely inclusive curricula demands comprehensive approaches encompassing Universal Design for Learning principles, differentiated instruction strategies, collaborative support systems, flexible assessment practices, and institutional cultures valuing diversity as educational strength. When provided with adequate support, resources, and

professional development, Spanish educators demonstrate remarkable creativity and commitment in developing curriculum adaptations enabling students with diverse disabilities to access rigorous content, participate meaningfully in learning communities, and demonstrate capabilities through multiple pathways. However, realizing inclusive education's promise requires addressing substantial implementation barriers including insufficient resource allocation, accountability systems misaligned with inclusive values, professional preparation gaps, and cultural attitudes that continue positioning disability as deficit rather than difference.

The findings underscore that inclusive education policy mandates alone prove insufficient without corresponding investments in teacher preparation, ongoing professional development, specialist support services, assistive technologies and accessible materials, collaborative planning time, and fundamental reconsideration of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices. Strengthening inclusive education in Spain requires sustained commitment from policymakers, education authorities, school leaders, and educators alongside meaningful participation from families and students with disabilities themselves in shaping educational practices affecting their lives. Future research should examine long-term outcomes of inclusive curriculum approaches for students with and without disabilities, investigate effective teacher preparation models developing inclusive education competencies, and explore how technology can enhance curriculum accessibility while ensuring digital inclusion. The Spanish experience offers valuable insights for other nations pursuing inclusive education, demonstrating both possibilities and persistent challenges in translating inclusive ideals into educational realities that genuinely serve all learners.

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