

Trends and Practices of Inclusive and Equitable Education: A Systematic Literature Review (2015–2025)

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Abstract

This study maps the landscape of research on inclusive and equitable education from 2015 to 2025. A systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA protocol. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database using the keywords “inclusive education” and “equitable education.” From an initial search of 9.850 documents, a screening process yielded 84 articles, reduced to 55 at the eligibility stage, and finally 48 articles were analyzed in depth. The review addressed three research questions: (1) whether inclusive and equitable education remains a significant academic field for the future; (2) how the distribution and research focus on this topic appear in academic publications; and (3) what theoretical and practical implications emerge from studies on inclusive and equitable education for the development of future education systems. Findings indicate that the issue remains highly relevant and is gaining academic attention, as reflected in the increasing trend of publications, international collaboration networks, and thematic diversity. The bibliometric analysis revealed five thematic clusters: disability and teacher education, leadership and teaching practices, digital literacy, equitable education linked to sustainable development goals, and inclusive pedagogies in primary education. Theoretically, the research underscores the need to shift from access-based to equity-oriented approaches, while practically it highlights the importance of coherent policies, adequate funding, teacher capacity building, technological innovation, social awareness, and global collaboration. Overall, this review provides a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive and equitable education is evolving and offers directions for future studies and policy development.

Keywords: Educational Equity, Equitable Education, Future of Education, Inclusive Education, Systematic Literature Review.

Introduction

Conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) on research mapping of inclusive and equitable education is becoming increasingly important due to gaps and variations in current research. Research in this field reveals significant geographical and contextual disparities; for

example, studies in Tanzania focus on gender equality and social inclusion in primary schools, emphasizing the need for more rigorous study designs and long-term follow-up (Nkya & Kibona, 2024), while research in Europe highlights inequalities and injustices within inclusive education systems, necessitating a comprehensive review of regional contexts (García-Bohórquez et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a lack of research in low and lower-middle-income countries, with few studies evaluating inclusive education interventions, highlighting a significant gap in understanding the implementation of inclusive education across different economic contexts (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024).

Methodologically, the studies also varied greatly, ranging from quasi-experimental designs in Tanzania (Nkya & Kibona, 2024), and systematic mapping reviews in Europe (García-Bohórquez et al., 2024), to co-teaching approaches (Ortega & Muñoz, 2025), highlighting the need for a standardized approach to evaluate and synthesize findings from diverse research. Thematically, the research covers a variety of topics, including curriculum development and the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia (Rante et al., 2020) as well as the role of local knowledge in inclusive education practices globally (Dharma et al., 2025), highlighting the need for an SLR to identify common themes and gaps among existing research.

Conducting an SLR offers various benefits: providing a comprehensive overview of existing literature, identifying effective interventions, and offering evidence-based recommendations for policies and practices, as seen in reviews of gender equality interventions in Tanzania (Nkya & Kibona, 2024) and inclusive education interventions in low- and lower- middle-income countries (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024). Additionally, SLR can help identify structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers to inclusive education and suggest strategies to turn these challenges into opportunities (Moreno-Tallón & Muntaner Guasp, 2025). Overall, given the identified gaps, methodological variations, and thematic diversity, a systematic literature review on mapping inclusive and equitable education research is crucial for advancing knowledge, guiding future research, and promoting inclusive education policies and practices globally.

This study focuses on exploring the research landscape regarding inclusive and equitable education and evaluating the relevance of this topic as a basis for future research. The study also reviews the evolution of academic discourse on inclusive and equitable education, while identifying how these findings can contribute to the development of educational theory, policy, and practice. The research question posed is:

RQ1: Will inclusive and equitable education still be a significant area of academic study in the future?

RQ2: How is the distribution and focus of research related to this topic in academic publications?

RQ3: What are the theoretical and practical implications that emerge from research on inclusive and equitable education for the future development of education?

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and Bibliometric Analysis to answer three research questions. The systematic literature review method is suitable for synthesizing existing research and helps identify gaps, trends, and future research directions, while also providing evidence-based insights that can influence policy, practice, and further research. This ensures that conclusions are drawn from a broad and representative research sample and highlights areas that require further investigation (Snyder, 2019). Bibliometric analysis will complement the review by measuring the distribution and impact of publications related to Islamic Leadership. Using VOSviewer and the Scopus database, this study will analyze publications related to Islamic Leadership from various journals, focusing on articles published up to September 14, 2025. This methodology allows for a comprehensive mapping of the field's development and provides a deeper understanding of its growth and future research directions.

Literature Review

The literature review indicates that the concept of inclusive and equitable education has experienced significant development between 2015 and 2025. Early definitions often emphasized accessibility for groups with special needs, but increasingly, researchers are linking inclusion with social justice, participation, and affirmative action (Schuelka & Lapham, 2019; Srivastava, 2024; Yang et al., 2025). This aligns with global frameworks such as SDG 4 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which emphasize that inclusive education is not just about enrollment, but also ensuring equal quality of learning experiences. **Source/Year Main Definition Important Notes** (Schuelka & Lapham, 2019). Inclusive education is a global effort to remove barriers to educational participation, rooted in human rights. Emphasize the connection to global trends and SDGs (Srivastava, 2024)

Inclusion means providing full access and support for children with disabilities to ensure they are equal in education. Focus on Children with Disabilities (CwD) (Carvalho et al., 2023). Equitable education is understood as providing autonomy, access, and fair treatment for all learners. The Portuguese case study highlights affirmative action policies (Sepadi, 2024). Inclusion is an evolutionary process, connecting the global curriculum with national needs to promote equity. Emphasizing the integration between the global and local contexts (Yang et al., 2025). Inclusive and equitable education is positioned as a sustainable framework for creating an equitable education system. Proposing the IPOF (input–process–outcome–feedback) model (Moreno-Tallón & Muntaner Guasp, 2025). Inclusion is not just about access, but also about social transformation, community awareness, and community participation. Emphasizing the social and cultural dimensions. (Wu, 2025) Inclusion is viewed as a multi-dimensional concept: fair classroom policies, culture, and practices. Scientometric analysis in China (1999–2024).

Table 1: Table of Definitions of Inclusive and Equitable Education

From the table, it can be seen that the definition of inclusive and equitable education is becoming broader and more multidimensional. Previously, inclusion was only understood as the integration of children with disabilities into the education system (Srivastava, 2024), but now this definition has been expanded to include aspects of affirmative action (Carvalho et al.,

2023), community participation (Moreno-Tallón & Muntaner Guasp, 2025), and global justice (Yang et al., 2025). Thus, the literature confirms that inclusive education is not merely about access, but also about fairness in resource distribution, cultural relevance, and the sustainability

of the education system (Schuelka & Lapham, 2019; Sepadi, 2024; Wu, 2025). This highlights the need for a comprehensive conceptual framework to ensure that inclusive education truly becomes a transformational practice, not just a formal policy.

Methods and Analysis

This study employs a systematic literature review with a bibliometric approach to quantitatively assess the literature, enabling the identification of trends, patterns, and key entities in the study of inclusive and equitable education. The PRISMA framework is used to ensure a comprehensive and replicable review process. With this approach, researchers gain a clear, transparent, and in-depth understanding of the research landscape being reviewed. Data was collected from the Scopus database using the keywords "inclusive education" and "equitable education." Initial search results found 9,850 documents. The initial screening process yielded 84 articles, then 55 articles were fully evaluated, and finally, 48 articles were selected for further analysis. The inclusion criteria used were: (1) articles published between 2015 and September 14, 2025, (2) written in English, and (3) explicitly discussing inclusive and equitable education topics in the title, abstract, keywords, or article content. Meanwhile, articles that did not meet these criteria, including proceedings, books, non-scientific reports, or articles without full-text access, were excluded from the analysis. Details of the inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found in Table 2.

Criteria Inclusion Exclusion

Year of Publication Articles published between 2015–14 September 2025

Language English articles Articles in languages other than English

Topic Focus

Articles published before 2015 or after 14 September 2025

Discusses inclusive and equitable education (in the title, abstract, keywords, or article content)

Articles that only discuss one (inclusive only or equity only) without explicit connection

Publication

Type Scientific journal articles

Proceedings, books, book chapters, non-scientific reports, editorials, or gray literature

Articles not available in full-text

Accessibility Articles accessible in full-text for Analysis

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSViewer software to visualize citation networks, author collaboration, and keyword linkages. This approach is combined with a systematic review to synthesize empirical findings, identify key contributors, and map research trends and directions. The combination of both provides more comprehensive results, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results of the

article selection process can be seen in Figure 1, which shows a PRISMA diagram of the identification process up to the articles that were finally analyzed.

Gambar 1. Diagram alur seleksi artikel berdasarkan PRISMA

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the 48 selected articles provides an overview of the development of research on inclusive and equitable education during the period 2015–2025. The results are presented based on three main aspects: publication trends, country distribution and collaboration, and research thematic focus.

Publication Trend

Figure 2 shows the development of publications from 2016 to 2025. The number of articles experienced a rather sharp fluctuation. In 2016, there were 2 articles, which then decreased to 1 article in 2017, and reached a low point in 2018 with no publications. The trend began to rise again in 2019 with 2 articles, increasing significantly in 2020 (5 articles) and 2021 (6 articles). However, there was a decline again in 2022 (1 article). After that, the graph shows a rapid increase with 8 articles in 2023, a slight decrease in 2024 (7 articles), and a peak in 2025 with 16 articles. Over all, the publication trend shows an upward direction, indicating that the issue of inclusive and equitable education is receiving increasing academic attention, particularly in the last five years. The significant increase in 2023–2025 indicates that this topic is gaining prominence in global academic discourse.

Figure 2: Publication Trends by Year

Distribution and Collaboration

Cluster by Country Bibliometric analysis based on author affiliations shows a fairly broad involvement from various countries in research on inclusive and equitable education. Developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands dominate the number of publications, solidifying their role as centres for the development of global academic discourse. This dominance is not only evident in the number of articles published, but also in the quality of the collaborative networks they build with other countries. Meanwhile, developing countries like South Africa, Jamaica, and Brazil are also showing increasingly prominent contributions, indicating a global concern for educational equity issues that transcends geographical and economic boundaries. Asian countries, particularly China, India, and Pakistan, are beginning to show significant involvement in this research network. Their involvement is not only important from the perspective of the quantity of publications, but also from the perspective of diversifying the educational contexts being studied. For example, the issue of access to education in countries with large populations like India and China enriches the global discourse on how the concept of inclusive education can be applied in different social, cultural, and economic conditions. Thus, the inclusion of Asian countries on the map of collaboration broadens the scope of perspectives and makes a unique contribution to academic literature.

Figure 3 presents a visualization of cross-country collaboration generated using VOSViewer software. This map shows the clear formation of five international collaboration clusters. These clusters demonstrate an intensive relationship between certain countries, while also mapping the flow of knowledge moving from major research centers to other regions. This collaboration pattern illustrates that although research concentration remains centered in developed countries, the involvement of developing countries continues to increase in line with the global need to realize a more inclusive and equitable education system. England and the United States appear to be the central hubs of the main network connecting researchers from various continents. The strategic role of these two countries makes them an "academic bridge" connecting Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa in the discourse of inclusive education. This position allows for very valuable cross-context knowledge transfer, making research in inclusive education not only locally relevant but also potentially providing universal implications. Thus, this map of international collaboration shows that inclusive and equitable education is increasingly seen as a global academic issue requiring cross-country synergy.

Figure 3: Country Collaboration Cluster from VOSviewer

Thematic Focus of the Research

Keyword co-occurrence analysis (Figure 4) shows that the term "inclusive education" is the dominant keyword and is connected to various other themes. Overall, there are five main thematic clusters.

Figure 4: Keyword map from VOSViewer results

Based on Figure 3, there are five main thematic clusters that have been summarized in Table 2.

Cluster Main Theme/Keyword Focus

- 1 (Red) disability, disabled person, students, humans, persons with disabilities, physical education, teacher education, education
- 2 (Green) human, female, teacher, teaching, childhood, leadership, article, human experiment
- 3 (Yellow) inclusive education, participation, digital literacy
- 4 (Blue) equitable education, special education, accessibility, gender equality, sustainable development goals
- 5 (Purple) primary education, inclusive teaching

Table 2. Thematic Clusters of Inclusive and Equitable Education

Research Overall, these results show that research on inclusive and equitable education is developing dynamically, with an increasing trend in publications, international collaborations involving both developed and developing countries, and thematic focuses ranging from macro aspects (access, policy, global justice) to micro aspects (teacher roles, pedagogical practices, and student experiences). A review of relevant articles supports the findings of this study, which directly addresses the three research questions and serves as a basis for further discussion.

RQ1: Will inclusive and equitable education still be a significant area of academic study in the future?

The increasing trend in publications, especially in 2025 which recorded the highest number of articles, indicates that the issue of inclusive and equitable education not only remains relevant but is becoming increasingly central in global academic discourse. However, this increase should not be read solely in a linear fashion. The surge in publications could reflect external drivers, such as international policies related to the SDGs or the availability of research funding, rather than solely organic growth in academic interest (Khan Soomro et al., 2025; Saiz-González et al., 2025). In other words, the relevance of this topic may be more influenced by global political and economic factors than by purely academic needs.

Additionally, the absence of publications in 2018 cannot be immediately considered a temporary hiatus; there may be methodological factors in the indexing or publication process that make the data for that year empty. This serves as a reminder that bibliometric trend analysis needs to be complemented with contextual understanding to avoid overgeneralization. Nevertheless, the continuity with the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 4: Quality Education) demonstrates that the study of inclusive education has long-term viability. In fact, the challenge ahead is how research in this field can bridge the gap between the normative discourse of "inclusion" and the real practices on the ground. Some studies indicate that despite the strengthening of inclusionary discourse, its practice is still often hindered by resource limitations, teacher readiness, and cultural resistance in schools (Duque- Vaca et al., 2025; Redondo et al., 2024). This confirms that academic significance needs to be followed by practical relevance for research on inclusive education to truly contribute to the transformation of the education system.

RQ2: How is the distribution and focus of research related to this topic in academic publications?

The distribution of research shows the dominance of developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, which serve as global network hubs. This pattern is consistent with findings in other bibliometric studies, where the dominance of countries with high research capacity is not only related to the number of publications, but also to access to funding, academic infrastructure, and international collaboration networks (Khan Soomro et al., 2025; Tanure Alves et al., 2025; Trang et al., 2024). However, this dominance has the potential to create epistemic bias: the perspective of inclusive education tends to be based on the context of developed countries, while the experiences of developing countries are underrepresented. The involvement of developing countries such as Brazil, South Africa, India, and Pakistan does indeed indicate an expansion of participation. However, this contribution is still relatively limited in determining the direction of global discourse. Often, researchers from developing countries enter international networks as collaborators, not research leaders. This raises a critical question: is the expansion of research inclusion truly equitable, or is it merely a reproduction of inequalities in knowledge production (Shume, 2023)?

From a thematic focus perspective, keyword analysis revealed five main clusters with inclusive education as the central connecting point. This indicates the complexity of the issue, which spans policy domains, access, global justice, and pedagogical practices. However, there is a tendency for research to focus more on normative dimensions like "fairness" and "access" rather than unpacking the actual implementation mechanisms in the classroom. In fact, some studies warn that the main challenge lies precisely in the gap between policy discourse and everyday pedagogical practices (Ullah et al., 2023). Thus, the current distribution and focus of research show positive developments in terms of global interconnectedness and thematic diversification. However, the critical challenge is how to reduce the bias of developed countries' dominance, strengthen the voices of developing countries, and shift the research focus from mere normative discourse toward more contextual and practical analysis.

RQ3: What are the theoretical and practical implications that emerge from research on inclusive and equitable education for the future development of education?

Research confirms that inclusive education is not merely about access, but must be viewed from an equity perspective, including fair resource distribution, affirmative policies, and recognition of the rights of students with diverse needs (AuCoin et al., 2020). Previous studies have used theoretical frameworks such as the capabilities approach, cultural-historical activity theory, and the rights-based framework (Daghustani & MacKenzie, 2021), which expand the understanding of inclusion from mere integration toward social justice, participation, and the transformation of the education system. Additionally, cross-context research indicates that inclusion theories must be adaptable to local factors-cultural, political, gender, and colonial history-making inclusive approaches more contextual and relevant.

From a practical standpoint, the research findings open up opportunities for policymakers and practitioners to comprehensively design inclusive education strategies. Its implementation requires consistent macroeconomic policies, equitable financing, and a supportive legal framework, while at the school level, improving teachers' capacity in knowledge, attitudes, and pedagogical skills is key to addressing diversity in the classroom (Sokal et al., 2025). The role of technology and innovation, such as the use of assistive technology and blended learning, has been proven to open up new access for learners with different needs (Corrêa et al., 2021). Public awareness is also important; public education programs, such as disability awareness, have a real impact on the attitudes of students and the community (A46). Additionally, global collaboration thru cross-country networks allows for the adaptation of best practices to local contexts without losing the global vision, strengthening the cross-country implementation of inclusive education (Biraimah, 2016).

Overall, these findings emphasize that equitable inclusive education requires an adaptive theoretical approach and holistic practical strategies, ranging from macro policies to classroom innovations, supported by public awareness and global collaboration.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the answers to the three research questions reveal that inclusive and equitable education continues to be a central and growing theme in global academic discourse, though



shaped by both internal academic interest and external global drivers such as SDGs and funding structures. The distribution of research shows encouraging global interconnectedness but remains dominated by developed countries, which risks reproducing epistemic inequalities. The theoretical discussions point to the importance of frameworks that move beyond integration to systemic transformation, while practical implications highlight the need for policies, teacher preparedness, technology, and global collaboration. Overall, the findings suggest that the future of inclusive and equitable education depends on bridging discourse and practice, amplifying voices from underrepresented regions, and strengthening adaptive, context-sensitive approaches.

Conclusion

This study reviewed 48 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2015 and 2025 to map the development of research on inclusive and equitable education. The analysis yielded five main findings. First, the publication trend shows a significant increase-peaking in 2025 which indicates that inclusive and equitable education is gaining global academic traction and will remain a relevant area of study. Second, the distribution of research is dominated by developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, but increasingly involves contributions from developing countries, reflecting the expansion of international collaboration. Third, the bibliometric mapping identified five major thematic clusters: disability and teacher education, leadership and teaching practices, digital literacy in inclusive education, equitable education and sustainable development goals, and basic education with inclusive pedagogical practices.

Fourth, the research emphasizes that inclusive education must be understood not only as access but also as equity encompassing resource distribution, affirmative policies, and recognition of diverse student needs. Theoretical frameworks such as the capabilities approach, cultural-historical activity theory, and the rights-based perspective extend the discourse from integration to participation, social justice, and systemic transformation. Fifth, from a practical standpoint, effective implementation requires consistent macro policies, equitable funding, teacher capacity building, technological innovation, public awareness, and cross-country collaboration.

At the same time, the findings reveal persistent gaps, particularly the limited leadership role of developing countries and the under exploration of intersectionality issues such as gender, ethnicity, and disability in inclusive education. Future research should therefore prioritize interdisciplinary inquiry, longitudinal analysis, and context-sensitive approaches that integrate local cultural, political, and socio-economic dimensions. In sum, this systematic literature review confirms that inclusive and equitable education is a dynamically evolving field with significant theoretical and practical contributions. It provides a comprehensive overview, highlights existing research gaps, and offers a roadmap for advancing more equitable, contextual, and sustainable inclusive education policies and practices.





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