

CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES IN RURAL AND URBAN SCHOOLS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Policies of inclusive education are expected to deliver equal learning opportunities, but the realization of these policies differs in rural and urban schools. This research was an attempt to compare major challenges affecting rural and urban mainstream schools in terms of converting inclusive education policy to classroom practice. There was a mixed-method comparative design and involved 160 teachers, 40 school observations, and 28 interviews. The teacher preparedness, availability of resources, administrative and specialist support, community acceptance, and implementation readiness were measured in quantitative data. The articulation of how barriers manifested in day-to-day school routines was done through qualitative interviews. Urban schools demonstrated higher implementation readiness compared to rural schools in all domains. The biggest discrepancy was in the availability of resources, then in the specialist support, and in teacher preparedness. Problems of rural schools included poor training and infrastructure, lack of assistive materials, lack of referral channels, transportation issues, and a more potent stigma of the community. Schools in the cities were lucky to get better access to services yet were faced with overcrowded classrooms, pressures of work, demands of exams, bureaucratic delays, and parental selectiveness. Results of regression revealed significant predictors of implementation readiness, including resources, administrative support, teacher preparedness, and community acceptance. Policy statements are not the way to achieve inclusive education. Rural schools require specific materials and enhance the accessibility of the schools, mobile specialists, and community consciousness. Urban schools require workload-sensitive training, flexibility of the assessment, and enhanced coordination. Inclusion practice is meaningful only when supported in a location-specific manner.

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a major challenge of educational quality because regular schools must teach learners with disabilities, minority-language learners, and those affected by poverty without segregation. The Salamanca Statement identified inclusive regular schools as a pathway to reducing discrimination (UNESCO, 1994), while the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities established inclusive education as a legal right (United Nations, 2006). Inclusion is also linked with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and equitable, quality education (UNESCO, 2020). UNICEF (2024) emphasizes trained teachers, accessible materials, modified facilities, and anti-stigma efforts. Thus, implementation, rather than policy endorsement alone, is central to inclusive education. The gap between policy and practice requires changes in law and financing, leadership and teacher education, assessment and curriculum, attitudes, and classroom pedagogy. Booth and Ainscow (2011) described inclusion as a reorganization of cultures, policies, and practices to reduce barriers, while Ainscow (2020) emphasized school reflection on exclusion. Inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to make learning accessible to all rather than creating low-expectation alternatives (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Training can improve knowledge but may also expose concerns about workload, behavior management, and practical adaptation when support is weak (Sharma et al., 2008; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Teacher beliefs and school support influence implementation. Savolainen et al. (2012) linked self-efficacy, particularly collaboration efficacy, with positive inclusion attitudes. Ahmmed et al. (2012) found that perceived school support, positive experience, and contact with learners with disabilities were related to positive teacher attitudes. San Martín et al. (2021) similarly found positive relationships between attitudes and self-efficacy. These findings suggest that implementation depends on teachers having the skills, time, materials, support staff, and leadership needed to accommodate diverse learners.

Rural and urban schools experience different implementation pressures. Urban schools generally have better access to specialists, training, resources, and supervision but may face overcrowding, workload, examination pressure, and diverse learning needs. Rural schools may have stronger community connections but often lack trained teachers, transportation, disability assessment services, infrastructure, and professional development. Amjad et al. (2020) found greater awareness of inclusive education among urban than rural teachers in Punjab, while Zwane and Malale (2018) and Stamatović and Maksimović (2023) reported training, resource, and contextual barriers in rural settings. A comparative rural-urban study is therefore needed because national averages can conceal how location changes the nature of implementation barriers. A missing specialist in a rural school may mean no disability assessment or referral pathway, while an urban shortage may mean insufficient services despite their availability. Donohue and Bornman (2014) cautioned that inclusive education can remain cosmetic when commitments are not supported by teacher capacity, funding, and accountability. This study examined teacher readiness, material and infrastructural resources, administrative and specialist support, and community acceptance to identify common and context-specific barriers and the policy support needed for mainstream inclusion.

Table I: Rural-urban comparison of common inclusive-education implementation barriers

Implementation domain	Rural schools: likely pressure points	Urban schools: likely pressure points	Relevant evidence
Teacher preparedness	Limited training access; fewer specialist mentors; lower exposure to disability-specific pedagogy	Training opportunities may exist but are uneven; high workload reduces application	Sharma et al., 2008; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Amjad et al., 2020
Resources and infrastructure	Shortage of assistive devices, ramps, adapted materials, transport, assessment services	Overcrowding, competition for resources, inconsistent assistive support	Okongo et al., 2015; Zwane & Malale, 2018; Stamatović & Maksimović, 2023
Administrative and specialist support	Weak referral pathways; long distance from therapists and district support teams	Closer services but bureaucratic delays and large caseloads	Ahmmed et al., 2012; Savolainen et al., 2012
Community acceptance	Stigma may be intensified by visibility and limited awareness campaigns	Greater awareness but stronger achievement pressure and parental selectivity	Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher preparedness is a central operational condition for inclusive education. Teachers' attitudes are influenced by disability type, training, experience, and support (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al., 2011). Training can improve attitudes and knowledge but also reveal practical concerns about inclusive classrooms (Sharma et al., 2008; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Demographic and experiential differences further indicate that a single training package may not address rural and urban implementation challenges (Forlin et al., 2009). Self-efficacy is another key factor. Malinen et al. (2012) found links between self-efficacy, attitudes, and readiness for inclusion, while Savolainen et al. (2012) highlighted collaboration efficacy. San Martín et al. (2021) and Miesera et al. (2019) also connected attitudes, self-efficacy, and teaching intentions. In rural schools, limited specialist cooperation may reduce confidence; in urban schools, class size, workload, and accountability pressures may constrain implementation. School support, resources, and leadership also influence implementation. Ahmmed et al. (2012) linked perceived school support with positive attitudes, while Jordan et al. (2010) and Specht et al. (2016) connected teacher beliefs and efficacy with inclusive practices. Okongo et al. (2015) found that teaching and learning resources contributed to inclusive education. Rural schools may therefore face greater shortages of assistive devices, adapted materials, ramps, screening services, and technical supervision than urban schools.

Research from South Asia and Africa shows a persistent policy-practice gap where inclusion is introduced without sufficient funding and support. Ahsan and Sharma (2018) found less positive attitudes toward inclusion of learners with high support needs among Bangladeshi pre-service teachers. Amjad et al. (2020) reported limited awareness among Pakistani public-school teachers, with greater awareness in urban settings. Zwane and Malale (2018), Donohue and Bornman (2014), and Opoku et al. (2017) identified training, resource, structural, and implementation barriers in other contexts. Rural schools often have weaker service networks, less professional development, and poorer infrastructure while implementing the same national policies as urban schools. Stamatović and Maksimović (2023) argued for locally appropriate rural inclusion models, and Sepadi and Themane (2014) reported training, funding, and resource difficulties in rural schools. Urban schools may have better external expertise but face large classes, workload, parental competition, and examination pressures. Thus, rural barriers are more closely associated with scarcity and distance, while urban barriers are more organizational and workload based. Implementation also requires coordination between classroom practice and system accountability. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasized inclusive pedagogy, while Booth and Ainscow (2011) highlighted participation and barrier reduction. Van Steen and Wilson (2020) showed that personal and cultural factors influence acceptance, and Lindner et al. (2023) found that teachers may hold ambivalent attitudes toward inclusion. Overall, the literature indicates that implementation depends on teacher capacity, resources, leadership, specialist collaboration, and community trust, supporting the need for a rural-urban comparison.

III. METHOD

Research Design

A mixed-method comparative design was used to study inclusive education policy implementation in rural and urban mainstream schools. A convergent design combined quantitative data on teacher readiness, resources, administrative support, and community acceptance with qualitative interviews describing daily implementation barriers (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Schools were selected from the same education division to maintain a comparable policy environment while representing different contexts.

Participants and Sampling

Participants included general education teachers, school head teachers, and inclusion coordinators where available. Stratified purposive sampling selected rural and urban schools with varying enrolment and resources. Eligible teachers had taught at least one learner with a disability or identified special educational need during the previous two academic years. The sample included 160 teachers, with 80 rural and 80 urban teachers; 20 teachers and 8 head teachers participated in interviews. Three instruments were used: a teacher questionnaire measuring preparedness, resources, expert assistance, administrative support, and parental/community acceptance; semi-structured interviews examining policy expectations and implementation difficulties; and a school observation

checklist covering accessibility, classroom space, learning aids, and individualized support. Questionnaire items were based on existing literature and used a five-point Likert scale.

Data Analysis and Ethics

Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and cross-tabulations compared rural and urban responses. Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed for training gaps, resources, workload, specialist support, and community attitudes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Survey, interview, and observation findings were triangulated. Ethical approval was obtained, participation was voluntary, and participant and school identities were anonymized. No student names or disability labels were recorded.

Table II: Operationalization of major constructs in the comparative methodology

Construct	Operational meaning	Primary data source	Planned analysis
Teacher preparedness	Training, confidence, and perceived skill in inclusive pedagogy	Questionnaire; interviews	Mean comparison; thematic coding
Resource availability	Access to teaching aids, assistive devices, accessible buildings, and classroom space	Checklist; questionnaire	Frequency table; rural-urban comparison
School support	Leadership encouragement, peer collaboration, specialist referral, and planning time	Questionnaire; head teacher interviews	t-tests; theme comparison
Community acceptance	Parent and community support, stigma, and willingness to enroll learners with disabilities	Teacher interviews; questionnaire	Thematic analysis; descriptive statistics

IV. RESULTS

Sample Characteristics and Scale Performance

The survey included 160 teachers, equally divided between rural and urban schools; 40 schools were observed and 28 participants were interviewed. Only 27.5% of rural teachers reported formal inclusive-education training compared with 57.5% of urban teachers. Female teachers represented 65.6% of the sample and primary teachers 57.5%. Equal rural and urban representation reduced the risk of imbalance in the comparison.

Table III: Final sample profile by school location

Characteristics	Rural	Urban	Total
Teachers surveyed	80 (50.0%)	80 (50.0%)	160 (100%)
Schools observed	20 (50.0%)	20 (50.0%)	40 (100%)
Teacher interviews	10 (50.0%)	10 (50.0%)	20 (100%)
Head-teacher interviews	4 (50.0%)	4 (50.0%)	8 (100%)
Female teachers	48 (60.0%)	57 (71.3%)	105 (65.6%)
Male teachers	32 (40.0%)	23 (28.7%)	55 (34.4%)
Primary level teachers	49 (61.3%)	43 (53.8%)	92 (57.5%)
Lower-secondary teachers	31 (38.7%)	37 (46.2%)	68 (42.5%)
No formal inclusive-education training	58 (72.5%)	34 (42.5%)	92 (57.5%)
At least one formal training/workshop	22 (27.5%)	46 (57.5%)	68 (42.5%)

The scales showed good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .79 to .91. The overall implementation-readiness mean was 2.75. Resource availability ($M = 2.55$) and administrative/specialist support ($M = 2.70$) were the lowest, while teacher preparedness ($M = 2.94$) and community acceptance ($M = 2.83$) were somewhat higher. The findings indicate that inclusive education was expected across schools, but capacity to translate policy into adapted lessons, accessible facilities, referral support, and parental collaboration remained uneven.

Table IV: Reliability and descriptive statistics for implementation scales

Scales	Items	Cronbach alpha	Overall mean	SD
Teacher preparedness	6	0.86	2.94	0.70
Resource availability	5	0.82	2.55	0.77
Admin/specialist support	6	0.88	2.70	0.68
Community acceptance	4	0.79	2.83	0.67
Implementation readiness	21	0.91	2.75	0.47

Rural-Urban Differences in Implementation Conditions

Independent-samples t-tests showed significant rural-urban differences across all implementation domains. Urban teachers reported higher teacher preparedness, resource availability, administrative and specialist support, community acceptance, and overall readiness. The largest difference was in resource availability, with a high effect size ($d = 1.58$). Overall implementation readiness also showed a very large difference ($d = 2.41$), confirming that location shaped both the level and nature of implementation barriers.

Table V: Independent-samples t-tests comparing rural and urban schools

Domains	Rural M	Rural SD	Urban M	Urban SD	t	p	Cohen d
Teacher preparedness	2.55	0.60	3.32	0.56	8.33	<.001	1.32
Resource availability	2.07	0.54	3.02	0.66	9.97	<.001	1.58
Admin/specialist support	2.37	0.66	3.02	0.54	6.84	<.001	1.08
Community acceptance	2.59	0.61	3.07	0.65	4.71	<.001	0.74
Implementation readiness	2.39	0.29	3.11	0.30	15.26	<.001	2.41

Observational Evidence and Community Acceptance

Observation findings supported the survey results. Urban schools had more ramps, assistive learning materials, referral records, and adapted lesson planning. Individual support plans were documented in 10.0% of rural schools and 40.0% of urban schools, while accessible toilets were present in 15.0% and 50.0%, respectively. The observation data confirmed that rural disadvantage involved both resource scarcity and weak accessibility and support structures.

Table VI: School observation checklist results by location

Observed conditions	Rural schools (n=20)	Urban schools (n=20)	Total (N=40)
Functional ramps or step-free entrance	6 (30.0%)	14 (70.0%)	20 (50.0%)
Accessible toilets	3 (15.0%)	10 (50.0%)	13 (32.5%)
Classroom space adequate for movement	7 (35.0%)	12 (60.0%)	19 (47.5%)
Assistive learning materials available	4 (20.0%)	11 (55.0%)	15 (37.5%)
Referral/contact record for specialist support	5 (25.0%)	13 (65.0%)	18 (45.0%)
Evidence of adapted lesson planning	6 (30.0%)	12 (60.0%)	18 (45.0%)
Individual support plan documented	2 (10.0%)	8 (40.0%)	10 (25.0%)

Community acceptance showed different patterns by location. Stigma was more frequently reported in rural schools, while achievement pressure was more common in urban schools. Low parental support or resistance was reported by 31.2% of rural teachers and 18.7% of urban teachers. Achievement pressure was reported by 32.5% of rural teachers and 56.3% of urban teachers. Parental reluctance affected attendance, disability disclosure, and teachers' willingness to seek additional support in both contexts.

Table VII: Community acceptance and social pressure indicators

Indicators	Rural teachers (n=80)	Urban teachers (n=80)	Total (N=160)
High parental support for inclusion	18 (22.5%)	31 (38.8%)	49 (30.6%)
Moderate parental support	37 (46.3%)	34 (42.5%)	71 (44.4%)
Low parental support/resistance	25 (31.2%)	15 (18.7%)	40 (25.0%)
Stigma reported as frequent barrier	43 (53.8%)	28 (35.0%)	71 (44.4%)
Achievement pressure reported as barrier	26 (32.5%)	45 (56.3%)	71 (44.4%)

Predictors of Implementation Readiness

The regression model explained 68% of implementation readiness. Resource availability was the strongest predictor, followed by administrative and specialist support, teacher preparedness, and community acceptance. Rural context remained a significant negative predictor, indicating additional effects associated with distance, service networks, transport, and monitoring. The results suggest that material, professional, and social supports should be addressed together rather than independently.

Table VIII: Multiple regression predicting implementation readiness

Predictors	Beta	SE	t	p	95% CI
Teacher preparedness	0.29	0.07	4.14	<.001	0.16 to 0.42
Resource availability	0.34	0.06	5.67	<.001	0.22 to 0.46
Administrative and specialist support	0.31	0.07	4.43	<.001	0.17 to 0.45
Community acceptance	0.18	0.06	3.00	.003	0.06 to 0.30
Rural context (1 = rural)	-0.21	0.08	-2.63	.009	-0.37 to -0.05

Qualitative Themes and Mixed-Methods Integration

Qualitative findings explained how the quantitative differences appeared in daily practice. Rural participants most frequently reported shortages of assistive materials, inaccessible buildings, training gaps, and weak referral follow-up. Urban participants more often reported large classes, workload, examination pressure, and bureaucratic delays. Both settings required stronger teacher preparation, while rural schools required greater facility and specialist access and urban schools required workload-sensitive support and assessment flexibility.

Table IX: Qualitative themes from teacher and head-teacher interviews

Themes	Rural coded references	Urban coded references	Interpretive summary
Training gaps and low practical confidence	22	13	Teachers described workshops as irregular and too theoretical for classroom adaptation.
Scarcity of assistive materials and infrastructure	25	12	Rural participants emphasized complete absence of devices, ramps, and adapted materials.
Large classes, workload, and examination pressure	11	21	Urban teachers reported that inclusion competed with syllabus coverage and ranking pressure.
Weak specialist referral and follow-up	18	15	Both settings reported delays, but rural schools faced longer distance from specialist services.
Parental/community stigma or fear	20	12	Stigma was linked to concealment, late disclosure, and irregular attendance.
Leadership support and peer collaboration	9	16	Urban schools more often reported informal teacher teams and head-teacher encouragement.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings showed a clear rural-urban difference in inclusive education implementation. Urban schools had stronger readiness, resources, administrative and specialist support, community acceptance, and overall implementation indicators, while rural schools faced greater scarcity, distance, and limited specialist access. Urban barriers were more closely related to congestion, examination pressure, bureaucracy, and unequal resource

pressures. The results support the view that national inclusive-education policy should be interpreted according to local school conditions. Teacher preparedness was strongly associated with implementation, consistent with findings linking attitudes, self-efficacy, and collaboration with inclusive practice (Savolainen et al., 2012; San Martín et al., 2021). Rural teachers had fewer opportunities for formal training and practical exposure. This supports Sharma et al. (2008) and Forlin and Chambers (2011), who showed that training can improve knowledge while practical concerns remain when support is weak. The present findings indicate that training needs to be accompanied by mentoring, materials, planning time, and referral systems, consistent with Amjad et al. (2020). Resource availability was the strongest predictor of implementation readiness, consistent with Okongo et al. (2015) and Zwane and Malale (2018). Observation showed that rural schools more often lacked ramps, assistive materials, support plans, and specialist referral records. The findings also support Stamatović and Maksimović (2023), who argued that rural schools need context-specific inclusion models rather than urban-developed solutions.

Administrative and specialist support also contributed significantly to readiness, consistent with Ahmmed et al. (2012). Supportive leadership reduced teacher isolation, while weak referral pathways created uncertainty. Urban schools had better access but still reported delays and large caseloads; rural schools faced greater distance and service shortages. Inclusive implementation therefore requires school support networks, mobile specialist services, and clear referral procedures. Community acceptance was significant but context-specific. Rural educators reported more stigma, concealment, and parental reluctance, while urban educators reported stronger pressure related to grades and school image. This aligns with Van Steen and Wilson (2020) and the warning by Donohue and Bornman (2014) that inclusion can remain symbolic when social and institutional conditions are inadequate. Rural communities may require anti-stigma awareness, while urban settings may need to reinforce that inclusion and academic quality are compatible. This also supports the inclusive-pedagogy approach of Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). The findings imply that professional development should be continuous, practice-based, and differentiated by context. Rural inclusion budgets should prioritize accessibility, transport-sensitive specialist services, and assistive resources, while urban policies should address workload and assessment flexibility. Monitoring should consider participation, classroom adaptation, and learner support rather than enrollment alone, consistent with Ainscow (2020).

VI. CONCLUSION

The study relied partly on teacher self-report and observations at a single point in time, and it focused on public schools within one education division, limiting generalization. Future research should include student and parent perspectives, classroom outcomes, and longitudinal policy tracking. Overall, rural and urban schools share the goal of inclusion but face different implementation conditions. Without context-responsive support for teacher capacity, resources, leadership, and community trust, inclusive education cannot be implemented evenly.

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