

# Reframing Inclusive Education through Epistemological Foundations and Global Practices for Supporting Diverse Learners

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## Abstract

Education systems worldwide aim to accommodate diverse learners, including students with disabilities, linguistic minorities, and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Inclusive education promotes equal access, participation, and opportunities for all students, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Beyond policy implementation, inclusive education also calls for a deeper epistemological shift, one that recognizes knowledge as socially constructed and shaped by cultural, linguistic, and individual experiences. This perspective challenges traditional, one-size-fits-all models of teaching and affirms the legitimacy of multiple ways of knowing. Grounded in this philosophical stance, the paper explores the theoretical foundations of inclusive education, including Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Drawing on global and Malaysian case studies, the study critically examines the implementation of inclusive practices, highlighting persistent challenges in teacher training, infrastructure, curriculum adaptation, and social attitudes. Best practices such as peer-assisted learning, differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive pedagogy are discussed. This paper offers practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and researchers to enhance teacher preparedness, learning environments, and policy effectiveness. By integrating epistemological insights with evidence-based strategies, it contributes to the ongoing discourse on fostering equitable, inclusive, and transformative education for all learners.

## Keywords

Inclusive Education, Diverse Learners, Epistemology in Education, Malaysian Education, Teacher Training, Educational Equity

## 1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and serves as a powerful tool for fostering individual growth and societal progress. However, ensuring quality education for all remains a significant challenge, particularly for diverse learners who differ in their abilities, learning styles, cultural backgrounds, linguistic proficiencies, and socioeconomic conditions (Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025; Chand, 2024). Traditional education systems frequently overlook to accommodate these differences, leading to disparities in learning opportunities and outcomes (Barnard & Henn, 2023). In response, inclusive education has emerged as a crucial approach aimed at eliminating barriers to learning and fostering an educational environment where all students, regardless of their background or abilities, can thrive.

Inclusive education is an educational philosophy and practice that ensures all students, including those with disabilities, linguistic minorities, and socioeconomically disadvantaged learners, receive equitable learning opportunities in mainstream classrooms. According to the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (2020), inclusive education is centered on equity, access, and participation, promoting learning environments where every student is valued and supported. Unlike special education, which segregates students based on their needs, inclusive education integrates diverse learners into mainstream settings while providing necessary support (Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025). The goal is not just physical inclusion but also fostering social, emotional, and academic engagement among all students.

From an epistemological perspective, inclusive education challenges traditional notions of knowledge as being fixed, universal, and hierarchical. It embraces a constructivist epistemology where knowledge is socially constructed, contextual, and co-created through interactions between learners and their environments (Mutekwe, 2017). This aligns with the idea that knowledge is not fixed but is actively created through interactions. On a similar note, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning is deeply rooted in students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds. His work has significantly contributed to social constructivist learning theories, which highlight the critical role of social interaction and cultural context in the learning process (Mohammed & Khalid, 2025; Mutekwe, 2017). From this perspective, meaningful learning arises through children's everyday activities and their interactions with others, reinforcing the idea that knowledge is constructed within a social and cultural framework.

The shift towards inclusive education is reinforced by international frameworks, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). This goal emphasizes that every child has a fundamental right to education and the opportunity to achieve an acceptable level of learning. Additionally, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education emphasizes the rights of students with disabilities to be educated in mainstream schools with appropriate support systems (The UNESCO Salamanca Statement, 2020; The Salamanca Statement and Framework

for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994). The Salamanca Statement, a product of a global conference in 1994, advocates for inclusive education as the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes. It asserts that schools should adapt to the needs of the child, rather than the child fitting into a rigid system. Many countries have since restructured their education systems to cater to learner diversity (Bibiana et al., 2020). These global initiatives have influenced national policies, including Malaysia's educational reforms, to adopt more inclusive practices in classrooms.

Diverse learners refer to students who require additional support due to differences in cognitive abilities, socio-economic status, cultural backgrounds, linguistic diversity, learning styles, or socio-economic status (Barnard & Henn, 2023; Lyn et al., 2021). To respond to this diversity, inclusive education has emerged as a key approach that seeks to meet the varied needs of all learners including those with disabilities, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with different learning preferences. This approach not only promotes equal access and participation in education but also supports the broader objectives of SDG 4 and aligns with the principles of the Salamanca Statement.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are learners from low-income households who often face barriers to education, including limited access to technology, quality nutrition, and stable home environments (Alias et al., 2023). In contrast, gifted and talented students demonstrate exceptional intellectual or creative abilities that require enrichment and acceleration beyond the standard curriculum. Additionally, culturally diverse students are those from varied ethnic, religious, or regional backgrounds which benefit from culturally responsive teaching approaches that respect and reflect their identities (Ober et al., 2023; Tchombe, 2023). Ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all these learners calls for tailored teaching strategies, flexible curriculum adaptations, and ongoing teacher training to meet their distinct needs effectively.

Recognizing the diverse needs of these student populations, Malaysia has taken significant steps toward fostering inclusive education through national policies and reforms. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) sets clear goals for increasing access to inclusive education by focusing on the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN), enhancing teacher preparedness, and improving school infrastructure. The Integrated Program (SEIP) and the Zero Reject Policy 2019 are key initiatives designed to ensure that children with disabilities are not excluded from mainstream education (Razalli et al., 2021; Bahagian Pendidikan Khas, 2019). In addition to these policies, the government has also invested in professional development programs to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to support diverse learners effectively. However, despite these efforts, significant challenges persist in achieving effective implementation of inclusive education across all regions of Malaysia.

While Malaysia has made commendable strides through inclusive education policies and initiatives, several persistent challenges hinder their effective imple-

mentation. One key issue is teacher preparedness; many educators still lack specialized training in inclusive pedagogy, making it difficult to address the varied needs of diverse learners. Additionally, infrastructural limitations remain a major concern, as many schools do not have accessible facilities, assistive technologies, or sufficient learning resources to support all students adequately (Macabenta et al., 2023; Bibiana et al., 2020). Compounding these barriers are prevailing social stigmas and limited community awareness, which contribute to resistance toward inclusive practices in certain regions.

Given the importance of inclusive education and the challenges in its implementation, this paper examines the current state of inclusive education by analyzing global and Malaysian case studies. It explores best practices from countries that have successfully implemented inclusive policies and offers strategies for improving inclusive education in Malaysia. Additionally, the study highlights future research directions that can inform educational policy and practice, ensuring that all learners, regardless of background or ability, can achieve academic success and personal growth.

This paper conducted a narrative review using literature from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, focusing on publications from 2010-2025. Inclusion criteria included empirical and review studies on inclusive education, with emphasis on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, UDL, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Finland and the United States were selected as case studies due to their established inclusive education policies and structures, providing insights for contextual application in Malaysia. This review is non-empirical, relying on secondary literature, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Future studies should highlight the need for localized empirical validation.

## **2. Theories Underpinning the Inclusive Education of Diverse Learners**

The concept of inclusive education is supported by various educational theories and models that emphasize the need for equitable learning opportunities for all students. These theories provide a foundation for understanding how to support diverse learners, address learning barriers, and promote inclusive teaching practices. This section discusses three major theories that underpin inclusive education namely Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Additionally, a theoretical framework is presented to highlight the practical application of these theories in inclusive learning environments.

### **2.1. Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory**

Understanding inclusive education also necessitates exploring its philosophical roots, particularly epistemology. In this context, the epistemological shift from positivist models of education where knowledge is treated as objective and quantifiable to constructivist and interpretivist paradigms is critical. These paradigms

recognize that learners bring diverse epistemic traditions shaped by culture, language, identity, and lived experiences. Consequently, teaching must be responsive to plural ways of knowing, which directly supports the application of inclusive educational theories such as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning is a social process, where knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. This theory is particularly relevant to inclusive education, as it emphasizes scaffolding as a process where teachers provide structured support to students based on their current abilities, gradually reducing assistance as learners become more independent. In the context of inclusive classrooms, Vygotsky's theory supports peer-assisted learning, differentiated instruction, and collaborative activities that help students with different learning abilities (Tchombe, 2023; Alkhudiry, 2022). For example, a student with a learning disability may benefit from guided peer interactions or teacher-led discussions that gradually build their competence. Studies have shown that collaborative learning strategies, such as peer tutoring, enhance academic performance and social skills among students with disabilities.

Building on this foundation, the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that students learn best when they engage in tasks slightly beyond their independent capabilities but achievable with guidance. This principle is applied in inclusive education policies, where personalized learning plans help diverse learners progress at their own pace. Closely related to this idea, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) emphasizes that learning and cognitive development are deeply rooted in social interactions and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Unlike traditional cognitive theories that focus on individual development, SCT argues that a learner's growth depends on the social environment, cultural tools, and interactions with more knowledgeable others (Alkhudiry, 2022; Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). This perspective is particularly relevant in inclusive education, where diverse learners require personalized support through scaffolding to reach their full potential.

In this regard, culture plays a fundamental role in shaping cognitive processes, values, and learning behaviors. Vygotsky argued that students acquire knowledge through cultural tools such as language, traditions, and social norms (Tchombe, 2023; Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is influenced by these cultural tools, as students rely on prior knowledge and cultural understanding to build new learning experiences. Therefore, scaffolding diverse learners in a cultural context requires teachers to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy, recognizing students' backgrounds and traditions in lesson plans (Ober et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2020). For students from marginalized communities, bilingual instruction or multimodal learning (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies) can enhance engagement. For example, Indigenous students in Malaysia benefit from contextualized learning experiences that integrate local stories, folklore, and traditions into the curriculum.

Equally important in the learning process is the role of the family. Family plays a crucial role in shaping a child's early cognitive and social development. According to Vygotsky, learning begins at home, where caregivers provide initial scaffolding before formal education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parent-child interactions, storytelling, and exposure to language-rich environments contribute to literacy skills and academic readiness. To support this, Anazia et al. (2025) stated that scaffolding diverse learners through family involvement can succeed when schools encourage parental engagement through workshops and communication channels. Teachers can provide home-learning resources, such as reading materials or online platforms, to reinforce learning at home. In Malaysian primary schools, parent-teacher collaboration programs have been implemented to support early literacy development among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Rahman et al., 2020).

Another essential aspect of inclusive education involves the learning environment itself. Vygotsky's theory also highlights the importance of the learning environment in shaping students' academic success. The physical, emotional, and intellectual climate of a classroom affects engagement, motivation, and achievement (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). Scaffolding diverse learners through learning environments includes structured classrooms with visual aids, group discussions, and hands-on activities that foster active learning. In addition, technology-enhanced learning (e.g., interactive whiteboards, AI-powered tutoring) supports students with special educational needs (SEN) (Mohammed & Khalid, 2025). A study in Malaysian secondary schools found that collaborative learning spaces significantly improved problem-solving skills among students from diverse backgrounds (Rahman et al., 2020). For Indigenous learners, Rahman et al. (2020) demonstrated the use of culturally contextualized digital storytelling modules, confirming the implementation of scaffolding practices aligned with Vygotsky's theory in Malaysia's Indigenous education contexts.

Tying all these elements together, social interaction remains central to Sociocultural Theory, as peer collaboration, teacher guidance, and group activities accelerate learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Through scaffolding, teachers provide temporary support until students develop independent problem-solving abilities. In this context, scaffolding diverse learners through social interaction includes cooperative learning strategies such as peer mentoring and group discussions, which can strengthen students' confidence. A case study in Malaysian classrooms demonstrated that peer-assisted learning (PAL) improved language proficiency and critical thinking skills among ESL students (Rahman et al., 2020).

## 2.2. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Model

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2014) promotes flexible teaching methods that accommodate diverse learners. The three core principles under this design include multiple means of representation through providing materials in various formats such as text, visuals, audio, interactive me-

dia. Besides, multiple means of engagement using varied instructional strategies to maintain student motivation also would support inclusive education among diverse learners. Meanwhile, multiple means of expression involve allowing students to demonstrate learning in different ways for example through essays, presentations, creative projects.

There were case studies in Finland about digital UDL strategies in Inclusive schools. Finland's basic education system applies UDL principles by integrating digital tools such as speech-to-text software, audio-enhanced textbooks, and flexible assessment formats. Research by [Hehir et al. \(2016\)](#) found that these adaptations reduced barriers for students with disabilities while benefiting all learners. In Malaysia UDL study was implemented based on teacher training. The Malaysian Ministry of Education has introduced teacher training programs focusing on UDL strategies. For instance, the "Guru Cemerlang" program equips educators with technology-driven teaching approaches, allowing them to design inclusive lesson plans that cater to students with diverse learning styles.

Epistemologically, UDL aligns with the belief that knowledge acquisition is not uniform but is influenced by multiple modalities of perception and expression. By offering multiple means of representation and engagement, UDL respects neurodiversity and acknowledges that learners interpret and construct knowledge differently. This philosophical stance underscores the principle that equity in education must consider not only access to knowledge but also the validity of diverse epistemic pathways. In Malaysia, the *Guru Cemerlang* and *Sijil Pendidikan Khas Integrasi* teacher training modules incorporate UDL-based strategies, equipping educators to design lessons with multiple means of engagement and assessment aligned with inclusive pedagogy ([Razalli et al., 2021](#)).

### 2.3. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

[Bronfenbrenner \(1979\)](#) emphasized that student development is shaped by multiple interconnected environments. His Ecological Systems Theory categorizes these influences into microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Microsystem is direct interactions (e.g., teachers, peers, family), mesosystem is a connection between settings (e.g., home-school collaboration), and exosystem is indirect influences (e.g., policies, community programs). Macrosystem involves societal and cultural values, while chronosystem emphasis on the impact of time and societal changes.

A case study in Canada was implemented about family-school collaboration for Inclusive Education. A study by [Anazia et al. \(2025\)](#) found that schools with strong parent-school partnerships provided better learning outcomes for students with disabilities. These schools implemented regular parental training workshops and home-learning support programs. Meanwhile, in Malaysia emphasis on the Inclusive Education Policy (IEP) Implementation. Malaysia's Inclusive Education Policy (IEP) encourages collaboration between schools, parents, and communities to support students with special needs. The National Special Needs Education Plan

(Bahagian Pendidikan Khas, 2019) has improved teacher-parent communication and increased resource accessibility for diverse learners.

The integration of these theories could strengthen the inclusive education by supporting personalized and scaffolded learning (Vygotsky), enhancing curriculum accessibility through UDL, and promoting family-school collaboration for sustainable learning environments (Bronfenbrenner). By leveraging these theoretical foundations, policymakers, educators, and school administrators can develop inclusive learning frameworks that empower diverse learners.

The application of these theories aligns with Malaysia's *Zero Reject Policy* (2019) and *Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025)*, illustrating their translation into local practice. Vygotsky's emphasis on scaffolding informs peer-assisted learning and individualized education plans in Malaysian inclusive classrooms. The UDL framework resonates with Malaysia's teacher training programs under the *Guru Cemerlang* initiative, enhancing flexible instructional designs for diverse learners. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework connects with Malaysia's Inclusive Education Policy by fostering collaboration between schools, families, and communities to create enabling learning environments.

### 3. Global and Malaysian Case Studies in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has gained global recognition as an essential component of equitable education systems. Countries worldwide have developed and implemented various policies to ensure that diverse learners receive the support needed to thrive in mainstream education settings. This section examines global best practices, focusing on Finland and the United States, further analyzing Malaysia's efforts and challenges in fostering inclusive education.

#### 3.1. Finland as a Model for Inclusive Education

Finland has long been recognized as a leader in education, particularly in its approach to inclusive education. The Finnish education system emphasizes individualized learning plans, early intervention programs, and strong teacher support systems (Sahlberg, 2015). One of the key principles of Finland's education model is that students with special education needs (SEN) are integrated into mainstream classrooms rather than segregated into separate institutions. This approach is based on the belief that all students should have equal access to quality education regardless of their learning abilities.

The Finnish education system offers a three-tiered support structure to address the diverse needs of students: general support, intensified support, and special support. General support is available to all students and includes strategies such as differentiated teaching and flexible instruction. For students who require additional help, intensified support provides targeted interventions like remedial instruction and small-group learning. Special support is designed for students with significant learning challenges and involves individualized education plans (IEPs) and close collaboration with special education teachers. In addition, Finland pri-

oritizes high-quality teacher training to ensure that educators are well-prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners (Gagnon et al., 2023). By emphasizing inclusivity and minimizing rigid academic tracking, the Finnish system cultivates an environment where all students are given the opportunity to thrive.

### **3.2. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States**

The United States has taken significant steps toward inclusive education through legislative measures such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). First enacted in 1975 and revised multiple times, IDEA ensures that students with disabilities receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This means that students with disabilities should be educated alongside their peers in general education settings whenever possible.

One of the central components of IDEA is the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a legally binding document tailored to each student's specific learning needs. The IEP is developed collaboratively by educators, parents, and specialists and outlines accommodations, modifications, and support services required to help the student succeed (Lyn et al., 2021). Schools in the U.S. also provide specialized services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and assistive technology to ensure equal learning opportunities for students with disabilities. However, despite the strong legal framework, challenges persist. Implementation varies across states due to differences in funding, teacher training, and resource availability. Some schools struggle to provide adequate support due to high caseloads for special education teachers and a lack of qualified personnel.

### **3.3. Malaysian Case Studies**

#### **3.3.1 Inclusive Education in National Schools**

Malaysia has made considerable progress in promoting inclusive education through the Inclusive Education Program (IEP) introduced by the Ministry of Education (MOE). This initiative aligns with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which aims to ensure that at least 75% of students with special needs are included in mainstream education by 2025 (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

In National Schools in Malaysia, students with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms alongside their peers as part of the country's commitment to inclusive education. To support this integration, teachers are encouraged to adopt differentiated instruction, utilize assistive technologies, and implement peer support systems to meet the varied needs of learners. These inclusive strategies aim to ensure that students with disabilities can participate meaningfully in classroom activities and have equitable access to the curriculum. However, the practical implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) as a key component of inclusive education remains a significant challenge in many schools. One major barrier is the lack of adequately trained special education teachers; many mainstream educators have limited exposure to inclusive pedagogical approaches and

struggle to modify instruction for diverse learners (Chand, 2024; Barnard & Henn, 2023; Razalli et al., 2021). In addition, inadequate infrastructure, such as the absence of ramps, elevators, and specialized learning tools, poses physical and instructional obstacles for students with disabilities.

Another contributing factor to the slow progress of inclusive education in Malaysia is the presence of parental concerns and societal stigma. Some parents of children with special needs are hesitant to enroll their children in mainstream schools due to fears of bullying, inadequate support, or a perceived lack of understanding from teachers and peers (Razalli et al., 2021). This reflects broader societal attitudes that continue to associate disability with exclusion or limitation. Nevertheless, the Malaysian government has taken steps to address these issues by revising national education policies, introducing more comprehensive teacher training programs, and increasing financial investment in special educational needs (SEN) resources. These efforts indicate a positive trajectory toward building a more inclusive and supportive school environment for all learners, regardless of ability. Recent Malaysian studies strengthen the evidence base, including Alias et al. (2023) on underprivileged student aid policies, Lyn et al. (2021) on teacher roles in pre-transition inclusive education, and Rahman et al. (2020) on digital storytelling modules for Indigenous learners. These studies illustrate Malaysia's evolving inclusive practices and provide current empirical evidence to inform policy and practice.

### **3.3.2. Indigenous Students in Indigenous Schools**

Inclusive education in Malaysia places growing emphasis on improving educational access and outcomes for Indigenous students, particularly those in Orang Asli communities. As the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, many Orang Asli students face systemic barriers such as language differences, socioeconomic disadvantages, and geographic isolation, all of which contribute to persistent educational disparities. These factors often result in lower academic achievement, high dropout rates, and limited opportunities for further education (Rahman et al., 2020). Recognizing these challenges, the Malaysian government has taken significant steps to create a more supportive learning environment. Key initiatives include the development of culturally relevant curricula that incorporate Orang Asli traditions, values, and ways of life into formal education. This approach not only affirms students' identities but also fosters a sense of belonging and engagement in the classroom.

In addition to curriculum reform, other government strategies aim to improve accessibility and participation. Mobile schools, for instance, bring education directly to remote villages through traveling teachers, ensuring that children in hard-to-reach areas are not left behind. Financial assistance programs, including scholarships and subsidies, are also provided to reduce economic barriers and encourage school enrollment. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. Many rural schools continue to suffer from teacher shortages, and there is often limited parental involvement due to low literacy levels or mistrust of formal edu-

cation systems. Furthermore, retaining students beyond the primary level remains a critical issue (Anazia et al., 2025). Addressing these ongoing obstacles requires a collaborative approach involving policymakers, educators, and local communities to co-develop sustainable solutions that respect cultural diversity while promoting educational equity.

### 3.4. Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Despite global progress in promoting inclusive education, significant challenges continue to hinder its effective implementation, particularly in terms of teacher preparedness. A major issue lies in the insufficient training that many educators receive regarding inclusive practices. Research indicates that general education teachers often feel ill-equipped to support students with disabilities or diverse learning needs due to a lack of exposure to special education during their initial teacher education programs (Gagnon et al., 2023; Barnard & Henn, 2023; Razalli et al., 2021). Furthermore, opportunities for ongoing professional development in inclusive strategies are limited, especially for mainstream teachers. This gap in training is compounded by high teacher workloads, as managing diverse classrooms requires additional time for lesson planning, differentiated instruction, and individualized student support—factors that can significantly increase teacher stress and reduce their capacity to provide equitable education.

In addition to human resource limitations, infrastructure and accessibility barriers also pose substantial obstacles to inclusive education. Many schools, especially in developing or rural areas, lack the necessary physical infrastructure to accommodate students with disabilities. For instance, the absence of ramps, elevators, and appropriately equipped classrooms restricts mobility and participation for students with physical impairments (The UNESCO Salamanca Statement, 2020). Equally critical is the limited availability of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, Braille materials, or speech-to-text software, which are essential tools for learners with visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities. Schools in remote or underfunded areas face compounded difficulties due to outdated resources, inadequate funding, and a shortage of specialized support services (Mohammed & Khalid, 2025; Rahman et al., 2020), further widening the inclusion gap.

Beyond logistical and training-related issues, social and cultural attitudes continue to present deep-rooted challenges to inclusive education. In some communities, disabilities are still stigmatized, leading to marginalization and exclusion of students with special needs (Razalli et al., 2021; Bahagian Pendidikan Khas, 2019). These negative perceptions can result in discriminatory practices within schools and reduced peer acceptance. Moreover, parental concerns regarding whether mainstream schools can provide sufficient support often lead to reluctance in enrolling children with disabilities in inclusive settings (Hehir et al., 2016). Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach that includes awareness campaigns, inclusive policy reforms, and enhanced collaboration between schools, teachers, and families. Creating an inclusive culture must go beyond infrastruc-

ture and training to challenge societal norms and ensure all students are welcomed, valued, and supported.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Inclusive education stands as a cornerstone for achieving equitable and quality education for all learners, particularly in an increasingly diverse global landscape. This paper has explored the philosophical and theoretical foundations of inclusive education, notably through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. These frameworks collectively underscore the importance of social interaction, accessibility, and the role of environmental systems in supporting diverse learners. Through global case studies such as Finland's three-tiered support system and the United States' IDEA legislation as well as Malaysian initiatives like the Malaysia Education Blueprint and the Zero Reject Policy, it is evident that inclusive education can be successfully implemented when supported by strong policy, teacher training, infrastructure, and community engagement. However, the Malaysian context still faces several implementation challenges when the Zero Reject Policy has led to increased enrollment of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The challenges including limited teacher readiness, insufficient infrastructure, and lingering social stigmas (Razalli et al., 2021; Bahagian Pendidikan Khas, 2019). Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, families, and communities to build inclusive school cultures that embrace diversity as a strength rather than a barrier. Future strategies should emphasize ongoing professional development in inclusive pedagogy, investment in assistive technologies, culturally responsive curriculum design, and family-school partnerships to ensure sustainable and meaningful inclusion. As the global and local education systems evolve in response to the Sustainable Development Goals and the increasing diversity of learners, inclusive education must not remain a policy ideal but become a lived reality in every classroom. As inclusive education advances globally, it must be grounded not only in pedagogical strategies but also in philosophical reflection. An epistemological lens compels educators and policymakers to question what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose perspectives are included or excluded. Only by embracing epistemic diversity can education truly serve all learners equitably and inclusively. Only then can education truly fulfill its promise as a transformative force for individual empowerment and societal progress.

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#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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