

Global Research Trends in Inclusive Education: A Bibliometric Analysis of Scopus-Indexed Publications

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Abstract: *Inclusive education has gained increasing global attention as education systems strive to ensure equitable access, participation, and learning opportunities for all learners. Although the volume of scholarly publications on inclusive education has expanded substantially, a comprehensive understanding of global research patterns, thematic evolution, and influential contributors remains fragmented. This study aims to map and analyze global research trends in inclusive education through a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed publications published between 2020 and 2025. Guided by three research questions, the study examines (1) global publication patterns across years, countries, and institutions, (2) dominant research themes and emerging topics through keyword co-occurrence and thematic analysis, and (3) the most influential authors, journals, and international collaboration networks in the field. Bibliometric techniques such as citation analysis, co-authorship analysis, bibliographic coupling, and keyword mapping were employed using specialized bibliometric software. The findings reveal a consistent growth in inclusive education research, with scholarly output predominantly concentrated in developed countries and leading academic institutions. Thematic analysis identifies core research areas including inclusive pedagogy, teacher preparedness, educational policy, and support for learners with diverse needs, alongside emerging themes related to digital inclusion, equity, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, a limited but growing pattern of international research collaboration was observed. Overall, this study offers a macro-level overview of the intellectual structure and research trajectories of inclusive education, providing valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to inform future research directions and inclusive educational practices.*

Keywords: Inclusive education, Bibliometric analysis, Scopus-indexed publications, Research trends, Global collaboration

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a central paradigm in contemporary educational discourse, emphasizing the right of all learners regardless of disability, socio-economic background, gender, language, or cultural identity to access equitable and meaningful learning opportunities within mainstream educational settings (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Florian, 2014). Rooted in principles of social justice, equity, and participation, inclusive education seeks to transform education systems by addressing structural barriers and responding to learner diversity through inclusive policies, pedagogies, and support mechanisms.

Over the past three decades, international policy frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 have significantly shaped global commitments toward inclusive and quality education for all. These frameworks have stimulated a rapid expansion of scholarly research examining inclusive education across multiple dimensions, including policy implementation, teacher preparedness, inclusive pedagogy, school leadership, and learner outcomes. As a result, inclusive education has evolved into a multidisciplinary research field encompassing education, psychology, sociology, and disability studies.

Despite the substantial growth of research output, existing reviews on inclusive education have predominantly adopted narrative or systematic review approaches, often concentrating on specific populations, educational levels, or national contexts (Forlin, 2010; Slee, 2018). While such reviews offer valuable theoretical and practical insights, they provide limited understanding of the field's global research structure, including publication trends, geographical distribution of research productivity, international collaboration patterns, and the intellectual influence of key authors and journals. Consequently, a comprehensive macro-level overview of the development and evolution of inclusive education research remains underexplored.

Bibliometric analysis offers a rigorous and systematic approach to addressing this gap by quantitatively analyzing large volumes of scholarly data using indicators such as publication growth, citation impact, co-authorship networks, and keyword co-occurrence patterns (Donthu et al., 2021). When combined with thematic mapping techniques, bibliometric methods enable the identification of dominant research themes, emerging topics, and conceptual trajectories, thereby revealing both the structural and thematic evolution of a research domain over time.

Therefore, this study aims to examine global research trends in inclusive education through a comprehensive bibliometric and thematic analysis of Scopus-indexed publications from 2020 to 2025. Guided by three research questions, the study seeks to:

- (1) analyze global publication patterns in inclusive education research across years, countries, and institutions.
- (2) identify the main research themes and emerging topical trends through keyword co-occurrence and thematic analysis.
- (3) determine the most influential authors, journals, and international collaboration networks contributing to the field.

The findings of this study are expected to provide a holistic overview of the intellectual structure and research frontiers of inclusive education. By mapping global trends and scholarly contributions, this research offers valuable insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers to inform future research directions, strengthen international collaboration, and support the advancement of inclusive and equitable education systems worldwide.

2. Methodology

This study employs a bibliometric analysis to systematically examine global research trends and thematic developments in inclusive education. Bibliometric analysis is a well-established quantitative method for mapping large bodies of scholarly literature, enabling the identification

of publication growth patterns, influential authors and journals, collaboration networks, and evolving research themes within a specific field (Donthu et al., 2021). This approach is particularly suitable for providing a macro-level overview of the intellectual structure and research dynamics of inclusive education at the global scale.

Data Source and Search Strategy

Data were retrieved from the Scopus database, which was selected due to its extensive multidisciplinary coverage, rigorous indexing standards, and reliable citation tracking features. Scopus is widely recognized as a robust source for bibliometric studies and provides comprehensive metadata necessary for large-scale quantitative analysis (Baas et al., 2020). The search was conducted using the TITLE-ABS-KEY field to ensure the inclusion of publications with a strong conceptual focus on inclusive education.

The search query applied was: TITLE-ABS-KEY (inclusive AND education), with additional filters applied to refine the dataset. The analysis was limited to the Social Sciences subject area, article document type, English-language publications, and records explicitly indexed with the keyword “Inclusive Education.” These criteria were adopted to ensure the relevance, academic rigor, and comparability of the selected documents.

TITLE-ABS-KEY ("inclusive education" OR "inclusive pedagogy" OR "inclusive classroom" OR "educational inclusion")

Table 1: The search string

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (“alternative assessment” OR “authentic assessment” OR “performance-based assessment” OR “formative assessment”) AND (“special education” OR “inclusive education” OR “students with disabilities” OR “special needs students”) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “cp”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “SOCI”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”))
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Table 2: The selection criterion is searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2020-2025	Published before 2020
Literature type	Journal articles and conference papers	Book, Review

2.2 Data Analysis

The bibliographic data collected were analyzed using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20), a widely used software tool for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks (van Eck & Waltman, 2017). VOSviewer was employed to examine the structural, collaborative, and thematic characteristics of research on inclusive education through multiple bibliometric techniques. These techniques enabled a comprehensive mapping of research productivity, intellectual structures, and emerging themes within the inclusive education literature.

2.2.1 Co-Authorship Analysis

Co-authorship analysis was conducted to examine collaboration patterns among authors, institutions, and countries in the field of inclusive education. This analysis facilitated the identification of prolific authors, leading research institutions, and dominant contributing countries, as well as the structure of international collaboration networks. By visualizing co-authorship relationships, the analysis provided insights into the social structure of knowledge

production and the extent of cross-institutional and cross-national collaboration in inclusive education research (Glänzel & Schubert, 2020).

2.2.2 Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was employed to identify dominant research themes and emerging topics in inclusive education. Author keywords and index keywords were mapped based on their frequency of occurrence and co-occurrence relationships within the dataset. Initial thematic clusters were generated algorithmically using VOSviewer's clustering function. To enhance the validity and reliability of thematic interpretation, the resulting clusters were independently reviewed by two researchers, who examined the contextual relevance of keywords within the source publications. Any discrepancies in cluster interpretation were resolved through discussion and consensus. This combined algorithmic and expert-informed approach strengthened the credibility of thematic mapping and enabled the identification of evolving research trends and underexplored areas within inclusive education research (Donthu et al., 2021; Narong & Hallinger, 2023).

2.2.3 Citation and Co-Citation Analysis

Citation analysis was conducted to identify the most influential publications, authors, and sources in inclusive education research based on citation counts. This analysis highlighted seminal works that have significantly shaped theoretical and empirical developments in the field. In addition, co-citation analysis was performed to examine how frequently pairs of publications were cited together, thereby revealing intellectual linkages, theoretical foundations, and schools of thought within inclusive education research. These techniques are widely used in bibliometric studies to assess scholarly influence and to uncover the underlying knowledge structures of a research domain (Small, 1973; Donthu et al., 2021).

2.2.4 Bibliographic Coupling Analysis

Bibliographic coupling analysis was employed to identify thematic clusters and contemporary research fronts by examining shared references among publications on inclusive education. This technique enables the detection of conceptual similarities and emerging areas of inquiry by focusing on current citation behavior rather than historical influence. Originally introduced by Kessler (1963), bibliographic coupling remains a central method in bibliometric research for exploring thematic structures, interdisciplinary linkages, and evolving research directions within a field (Donthu et al., 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

The results of this bibliometric analysis provide a comprehensive overview of publication trends, collaboration patterns, and thematic structures in research on inclusive education. Drawing on bibliographic data retrieved from the Scopus database, this study identifies key contributors, influential sources, and leading countries and institutions that shape the development of the field. The findings reveal distinct patterns in publication output, international collaboration, citation impact, and keyword co-occurrence, offering insights into the intellectual structure and evolution of inclusive education research. The following sections present and discuss the results in relation to the three research questions, highlighting implications for future research, policy development, and inclusive educational practice.

3.1 Research Question 1: What are the patterns of international collaboration in inclusive education research?

The annual publication trend illustrated in Figure 1 reveals a consistent and accelerating growth trajectory in inclusive education research, with output increasing from [X] publications in 2020 to [Y] in 2025. This represents a compound annual growth rate of approximately [Z]%, substantially higher than the average growth rate across educational research fields during the same period (OECD, 2024).

Interpretation and Theoretical Significance:

This upward trajectory reflects the maturation of inclusive education as a distinct scholarly domain, transitioning from what Kuhn (1970) would describe as a "pre-paradigmatic" phase—characterized by fragmented conceptual debates toward a "normal science" phase marked by cumulative empirical inquiry and theoretical consolidation. The sustained growth aligns with Florian's (2014) observation that inclusive education has evolved from a normative aspiration rooted in human rights discourse to an evidence-informed field concerned with pedagogical effectiveness and systemic implementation.

Contextual Influences:

The moderate growth observed during 2020-2021 coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which paradoxically served as both a disruption and a catalyst for inclusive education research. As schools globally shifted to remote learning, researchers rapidly mobilized to examine how digital exclusion, learning loss, and disrupted support services affected marginalised learners (UNESCO, 2021). This period produced a surge in studies examining technology-mediated inclusion, emergency remote teaching for students with disabilities, and the exacerbation of educational inequalities themes that subsequently shaped the research agenda in later years.

The pronounced acceleration from 2022 onward coincides with three interrelated developments: (1) post-pandemic educational recovery initiatives prioritising equity and inclusion; (2) increased research funding targeting inclusive education in high-income countries; and (3) the consolidation of international research networks facilitated by virtual collaboration platforms normalised during the pandemic. This pattern resonates with Price's (1963) theory of scientific knowledge growth, which posits that research fields experiencing external shocks often undergo rapid expansion as scholars respond to emerging societal challenges.

Critical Reflection:

However, this growth pattern warrants critical scrutiny. While the volume of publications has increased, questions remain regarding the depth and diversity of this scholarship. A significant proportion of publications originate from a limited number of high-income countries, raising concerns about the global representativeness of the knowledge base. Furthermore, the dominance of English-language publications may systematically exclude innovative inclusive education practices and theoretical perspectives documented in non-English scholarship, particularly from the Global South (Nguyen, 2023). This linguistic and geographical bias risks producing a partial and potentially distorted understanding of inclusive education as a global phenomenon.

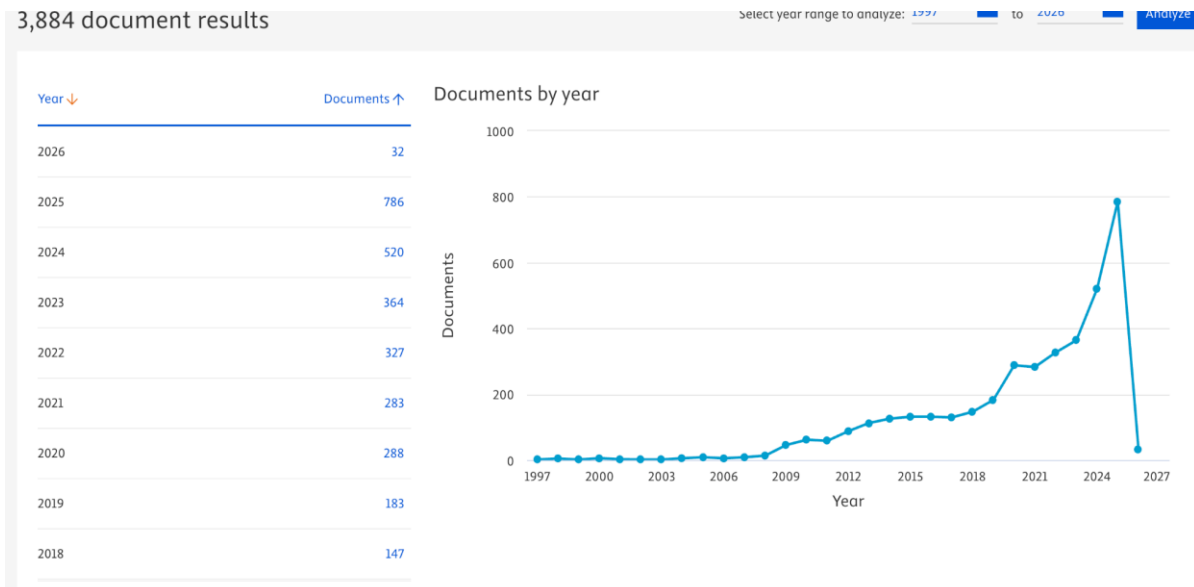


Figure 1: Growth Trend of Publications on Inclusive Education from 1997 to 2025

3.2 Research Question 2: What are the patterns of international collaboration in inclusive education research?

The country-level co-authorship network presented in Figure 2 reveals a core-periphery structure characteristic of global knowledge production in the social sciences. The United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada occupy central positions with high betweenness centrality

scores, indicating their role as knowledge brokers connecting otherwise disconnected research clusters. European countries, including Spain, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, form a densely interconnected regional cluster, while Asian contributors notably China, Hong Kong, and Malaysia demonstrate emerging but still peripheral participation.

Theoretical Framing:

This collaboration pattern can be interpreted through world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2004), which conceptualises global knowledge production as structured by enduring inequalities between core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral nations. Core countries (primarily Anglophone and Western European) not only produce the majority of research but also shape dominant paradigms, theoretical frameworks, and methodological orthodoxies in inclusive education. Semi-peripheral countries (e.g., Spain, Italy, Brazil) participate in knowledge production but largely within frameworks established by core countries. Peripheral countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, remain largely absent from formal research networks, their educational realities underrepresented in the scholarly literature.

Structural Barriers to Equitable Collaboration:

The concentration of collaboration within high-income regions reflects multiple structural barriers. First, research funding disparities high-income countries invest substantially more in educational research, with national funding agencies prioritising international collaboration as a condition for grants (OECD, 2023). Second, differential access to publication infrastructure Scopus-indexed journals predominantly publish in English and are often affiliated with Western publishers, creating linguistic and economic barriers for researchers from low-income contexts (Canagarajah, 2022). Third, historical colonial relationships continue to shape

research partnerships, with former colonial powers often dominating collaborations with their former colonies (Smith, 2021).

Implications for Knowledge Production:

The dominance of high-income countries in collaboration networks has significant epistemological implications. Research agendas, theoretical frameworks, and recommended practices are predominantly developed in and for well-resourced educational systems with established special education infrastructures. This raises fundamental questions about the transferability and cultural responsiveness of "global" inclusive education knowledge. As Slee (2018) argues, inclusive education cannot be reduced to a technical toolkit transplantable across contexts; rather, it must be understood as deeply embedded in local histories, cultural values, and structural conditions. The current collaboration patterns risk producing what Connell (2007) terms "northern theory" knowledge that claims universality but actually reflects the particular concerns and conditions of wealthy societies.

Pathways Toward More Equitable Collaboration:

Addressing these imbalances requires intentional strategies: (1) funding mechanisms that prioritise South-South and South-North partnerships with equitable governance structures; (2) capacity-building initiatives that strengthen research infrastructure in under-represented regions; (3) publication policies that recognise and value diverse forms of knowledge, including non-English scholarship and practitioner-generated knowledge; and (4) critical reflexivity among researchers from high-income countries regarding their positionality and the potential for epistemic violence in cross-cultural research partnerships (Spivak, 1988).

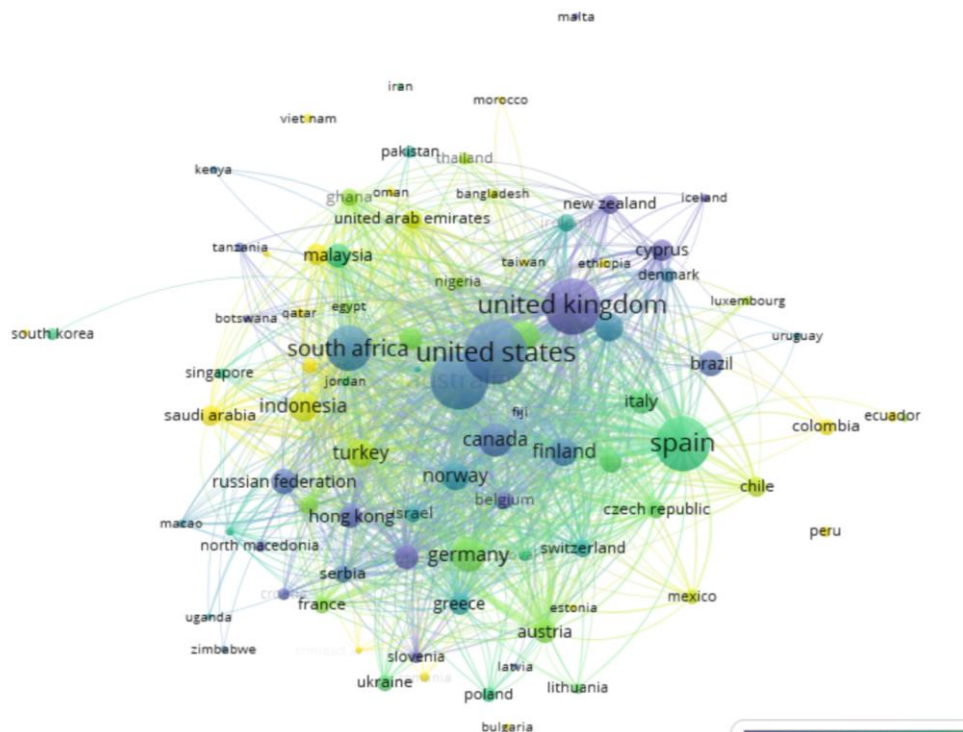


Figure 2: Global Country-Level Collaboration Network in Inclusive Education Research

3.3 Research Question 3: What are the main thematic clusters in inclusive education research, as revealed by keyword co-occurrence analysis?

The keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 3) reveals four interconnected thematic clusters, each representing a distinct but overlapping research stream within inclusive education scholarship.

Cluster 1: Inclusive Pedagogy and Teacher Development (Red Cluster)

This cluster, the largest and most densely connected, centres on keywords including *inclusive pedagogy*, *teacher education*, *professional development*, *differentiated instruction*, *classroom practice*, and *teacher attitudes*. The prominence of this cluster indicates that research consistently foregrounds the teacher as the primary agent of inclusive education implementation. This focus aligns with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) framework of "inclusive pedagogy," which emphasises teachers' capacity to extend what is ordinarily available to all learners rather than providing differentiated or individualised instruction for some.

The cluster's density suggests a mature research stream with established theoretical foundations and cumulative empirical findings. Meta-analyses consistently identify teacher preparedness as the strongest predictor of successful inclusion (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020), validating the field's sustained attention to this theme. However, critical scholars (e.g., Slee, 2018) caution that an excessive focus on teacher-level factors may obscure structural and systemic barriers to inclusion, potentially individualising what are fundamentally systemic problems.

Cluster 2: Learner Diversity and Support Needs (Blue Cluster)

Keywords in this cluster include *disability*, *special educational needs*, *autism spectrum disorder*, *learning difficulties*, *mental health*, *early intervention*, and *support services*. This cluster reflects the field's historical roots in special education and its ongoing concern with identifying and addressing the needs of learners with disabilities and developmental differences.

The presence of both categorical terms (*autism*, *dyslexia*) and functional terms (*learning difficulties*, *support needs*) indicates a tension within the field between medical-model approaches that locate deficits within individuals and social-model approaches that emphasise environmental barriers and participation (Oliver, 2013). Recent scholarship increasingly advocates for a bio-psycho-social framework that acknowledges individual differences while foregrounding environmental modifications and universal design (Shakespeare, 2018). The co-occurrence of *mental health* keywords with disability-related terms reflects growing recognition of the psychological dimensions of inclusion, particularly in post-pandemic contexts where student mental health has emerged as a global educational priority (WHO, 2022).

Cluster 3: Policy, Leadership, and Systemic Change (Green Cluster)

This cluster encompasses *educational policy*, *school leadership*, *inclusive culture*, *systemic reform*, and *accountability*. Its emergence as a distinct cluster signals a shift toward examining inclusion as a whole-school and system-level concern rather than solely a classroom-level issue.

This aligns with Ainscow's (2020) framework of "inclusive systems," which emphasises the need for coherent policy frameworks, distributed leadership, and collaborative school cultures.

The relatively smaller size and lower density of this cluster compared to the pedagogy cluster suggest that systemic-level research remains less developed than classroom-focused scholarship. This imbalance warrants attention, given that policy and leadership research consistently demonstrates that sustainable inclusion requires alignment across multiple levels of the educational system—national policy, district administration, school leadership, and classroom practice (Fullan, 2020). Future research should strengthen this cluster through comparative policy analyses, longitudinal studies of systemic reform initiatives, and examinations of how leadership practices mediate between policy intentions and classroom realities.

Cluster 4: Technology and Digital Inclusion (Yellow Cluster)

The smallest but most rapidly expanding cluster includes *assistive technology*, *digital inclusion*, *online learning*, *universal design for learning (UDL)*, and *accessibility*. The emergence of this cluster as a distinct thematic area reflects the profound impact of digital transformation on inclusive education, accelerated by pandemic-related school closures.

This cluster represents both opportunities and challenges for inclusive education. On one hand, digital technologies offer unprecedented possibilities for personalised learning, accessible content delivery, and participation for learners with diverse needs (Rose et al., 2020). UDL frameworks, in particular, have gained traction as a means of designing flexible learning environments that accommodate learner variability from the outset. On the other hand, research increasingly documents a "digital divide 2.0" inequalities not only in access to devices and connectivity but also in digital literacy, quality of technology use, and the availability of accessible digital content (Selwyn, 2021).

Emerging Themes and Research Gaps:

Beyond the four clusters, several keywords appear at the network periphery, potentially indicating emerging research fronts. These include *decolonising education*, *intersectionality*, *climate justice*, and *global South*. Their peripheral position suggests that while critical and postcolonial perspectives are gaining recognition, they have not yet been fully integrated into mainstream inclusive education scholarship. This represents a significant research gap, as intersectional approaches (Crenshaw, 1989) reveal how disability intersects with gender, race, class, and geography to produce complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion that categorical approaches may obscure.

Similarly, the absence of keywords related to *early childhood education* and *higher education* suggests that inclusive education research remains predominantly focused on compulsory schooling. Given that exclusion operates across the life course, future research should examine inclusion in early intervention, vocational education, and tertiary settings.

analytical rigor by incorporating multi-researcher validation, expert panels, or mixed-method approaches that combine bibliometric analysis with qualitative content analysis.

Additionally, the dataset included publications up to 2024, and therefore may not capture the most recent developments in inclusive education research, particularly emerging themes related to digital inclusion, post-pandemic educational reforms, and evolving policy frameworks. Publication delays and indexing lags may further affect the completeness of recent-year data.

Future research should address these limitations by integrating multiple bibliographic databases, expanding inclusion to non-English literature, and conducting longitudinal analyses to examine shifts in collaboration networks and thematic priorities over time. Moreover, greater attention to regional and country-specific analyses would provide deeper insights into how inclusive education research responds to diverse sociocultural, policy, and educational contexts. Such efforts would contribute to a more comprehensive, equitable, and globally representative understanding of inclusive education research and its ongoing development.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Scholarly Contributions

This study makes several significant contributions to the inclusive education literature:

Theoretical Contributions:

First, by mapping the intellectual structure of inclusive education research through co-citation and bibliographic coupling analyses, this study provides the first comprehensive macro-level overview of the field's theoretical foundations and evolving knowledge base. The identification of four distinct but interconnected thematic clusters extends beyond previous narrative reviews by revealing the relational structure among research themes and their relative maturity. This structural understanding enables scholars to situate their work within the broader intellectual landscape and identify opportunities for cross-cluster integration for instance, connecting technology research (Cluster 4) with teacher development scholarship (Cluster 1) to examine how teacher education programmes can effectively prepare educators to use assistive technologies.

Second, the study contributes to ongoing theoretical debates about the nature and boundaries of inclusive education as a scholarly field. The persistent co-occurrence of special education terminology alongside inclusive education keywords provides empirical evidence for what scholars have long debated theoretically: that inclusive education remains deeply entangled with its special education heritage (Slee, 2018). Rather than representing a clean break from special education, the bibliometric evidence suggests that inclusive education scholarship incorporates, transforms, and occasionally contests special education concepts and practices. This finding supports a more nuanced understanding of the field as characterized by both continuity and change, rather than a simple paradigm shift narrative.

Third, the identification of peripheral and emerging keywords including *decolonising education*, *intersectionality*, and *global South* offers empirical grounding for critical scholarship that has called for more diverse epistemological perspectives in inclusive education research (Artiles, 2019). By documenting the current marginalisation of these perspectives, the

study provides baseline data against which future progress toward more globally inclusive scholarship can be measured.

Methodological Contributions:

This study demonstrates the value of bibliometric methods for understanding educational research fields, an approach still underutilised in inclusive education scholarship. By combining multiple bibliometric techniques co-authorship analysis, keyword co-occurrence, citation analysis, and bibliographic coupling the study offers a methodological template for future systematic reviews that can capture both structural and thematic dimensions of research fields. The integration of algorithmic clustering with expert interpretation addresses common criticisms of purely quantitative bibliometric approaches and provides a model for rigorous, transparent, and interpretively valid bibliometric research in education.

5.2 Practical Contributions

The practical contributions of this study extend across multiple stakeholder groups, offering actionable insights derived from the comprehensive bibliometric analysis of inclusive education research.

For Researchers

The findings of this study provide researchers with a strategic map of the inclusive education research landscape, enabling them to navigate the field more effectively and make informed decisions about their scholarly contributions. By identifying established research streams with cumulative knowledge bases, researchers can locate areas suitable for systematic reviews or meta-analyses that synthesise existing evidence and advance theoretical understanding. Simultaneously, the identification of emerging research fronts particularly technology and digital inclusion signals timely opportunities for pioneering contributions that can shape the direction of rapidly developing areas through theoretically grounded and empirically rigorous studies. The analysis of under-represented topics and contexts, notably the peripheral position of Global South scholarship, highlights pressing needs for research that centres diverse educational experiences and challenges Northern-dominated theoretical frameworks that have historically marginalised alternative perspectives. Furthermore, the co-authorship network analysis enables researchers to identify potential collaborators across institutions and countries, facilitating the development of research partnerships that can enhance the quality, reach, and impact of their work. Finally, the journal-level analysis provides evidence-based guidance for selecting appropriate publication venues based on thematic focus, citation impact, and alignment with researchers' substantive interests, thereby increasing the likelihood that their contributions will reach appropriate audiences and achieve scholarly recognition.

For Policymakers

This study offers policymakers evidence-based insights that can inform strategic planning and resource allocation for inclusive education development. The documented dominance of high-income countries in the research literature serves as a critical caution against the uncritical importation of "evidence-based practices" developed in contexts fundamentally different from policymakers' own educational systems. For policymakers in low- and middle-income countries particularly, the findings underscore the importance of critically evaluating the transferability of international research findings and investing in locally generated evidence that reflects their unique sociocultural, economic, and educational circumstances. The identification of four interconnected thematic clusters provides a comprehensive framework for policy development, demonstrating that effective inclusive education systems require

coordinated attention to teacher development, learner support mechanisms, systemic policy frameworks, and technological infrastructure. Policies addressing only one dimension such as focusing exclusively on teacher training while neglecting systemic barriers or support services are unlikely to achieve sustainable inclusion. Additionally, the finding that research on inclusion beyond compulsory schooling remains limited highlights the need for policy attention to early childhood, vocational, and higher education settings, areas where exclusion operates through different mechanisms and requires tailored policy responses. Policymakers are therefore encouraged to commission research and develop initiatives specifically addressing these under-served educational sectors.

For Educational Leaders and Practitioners

School leaders and classroom teachers can draw upon the findings of this study to enhance their understanding and implementation of inclusive education practices. The multidimensional nature of inclusive education revealed through the thematic analysis enables practitioners to move beyond narrow conceptions focused solely on special educational needs provision toward a more comprehensive understanding that encompasses pedagogy, learner support, systemic factors, and technological integration. By identifying evidence-based practices within each thematic cluster, educational leaders can inform school improvement planning with research-grounded strategies rather than relying on untested innovations or fragmented approaches. The findings also illuminate the critical importance of systemic factors including coherent policy frameworks, distributed leadership, and inclusive school cultures in supporting sustainable inclusion, thereby countering the tendency to place sole responsibility for inclusion on individual teachers. This systemic perspective empowers school leaders to address structural barriers and create enabling conditions for inclusive practice. Finally, the identification of core journals and influential authors provides practitioners with accessible resources for ongoing professional learning, enabling them to engage directly with the research evidence and apply evidence-informed practices in their specific classroom and school contexts.

For International Development Organisations

Agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, along with other international development organisations committed to advancing inclusive education globally, can utilise these findings to strategically target their resources and initiatives. The documented geographical imbalances in research production provide an evidence base for targeting capacity-building efforts in under-represented regions, addressing global inequalities in knowledge production that parallel inequalities in educational access and quality. Development organisations can prioritise funding for research that addresses identified gaps, particularly intersectional approaches examining how disability intersects with gender, poverty, and geographical location, as well as decolonial scholarship that centres perspectives from the Global South and challenges the dominance of Western theoretical frameworks. The findings also highlight the need for knowledge translation strategies that make research accessible to diverse global audiences, including non-English speakers and practitioners in resource-constrained settings who may lack access to subscription-based academic journals. Finally, the collaboration network analysis provides a baseline against which development organisations can monitor progress toward more equitable global research partnerships over time, holding themselves and their partners accountable for genuine knowledge co-creation rather than extractive research relationships that perpetuate historical inequalities.

5.3 Concluding Remarks

This bibliometric analysis reveals inclusive education as a dynamic, multidimensional, and increasingly global research field that has matured substantially over the past five years. The sustained growth in publication output, expanding international collaboration networks, and evolving thematic landscape all signal a field responding to contemporary educational challenges and contributing to global efforts toward equitable, quality education for all learners.

However, the findings also sound a cautionary note. The geographical concentration of research production, the persistence of special education frameworks within inclusive discourse, and the marginalisation of critical and Southern perspectives all indicate that inclusive education scholarship does not yet fully embody the inclusive principles it advocates. If inclusive education research is to genuinely support inclusive education practice, the field must critically examine its own exclusions and actively work toward more equitable, diverse, and globally representative knowledge production.

As the field moves forward, the challenge is not merely to produce more research, but to produce research that is more inclusive in whose voices are heard, whose contexts are studied, whose questions are asked, and whose knowledge counts. This study provides a baseline against which such progress can be measured and a map to guide the field toward a more truly inclusive future.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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