

Inclusion on Paper: Legal Frameworks, Policy Commitments, and Institutional Realities of Inclusive Education in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has established itself as an international norm, enshrined in the major instruments of disability rights law and reaffirmed by the development commitments of the twenty-first century. In response, Cameroon has built a coherent legal and policy architecture: Law No. 2010/002 on the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities, the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Education and Training Sector Plan 2020-2030. This critical review article sets that normative architecture against the institutional realities observable in the primary schools of Yaoundé. Drawing on a systematic reading of the scientific literature, institutional reports, and available field data, it documents a persistent gap between legal ambition and daily practice. The indicators converge: fewer than six hours devoted to special educational needs in initial teacher training, adapted infrastructure present in fewer than 3% of primary schools, the absence of any national screening mechanism, and weak coordination between the health and education sectors. The analysis shows that this gap does not stem from a deficit of normative will but from a chain of implementation conditions that remain unmet, chief among them teacher preparation, financing, and infrastructure. The article concludes that inclusion in Cameroon remains largely declarative and offers ranked recommendations to narrow the distance between the text and the classroom, from a perspective attentive to the specificity of the sub-Saharan context.

Keywords: inclusive education; Cameroon; education policy; disability; special educational needs; teacher training; sub-Saharan Africa

INTRODUCTION

Few ideas have enjoyed as rapid a career in education as inclusion. Within three decades, the principle that all children, whatever their disability, learning difference, or social origin, have the right to be schooled together, in the same schools and the same classrooms with appropriate supports, has moved from the status of an activist demand to that of a legal norm inscribed in the most authoritative instruments of international human rights law. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015) have each, in their own way, locked in a normative consensus that almost no state openly contests today.

The difficulty begins after the consensus. For the translation of that norm into institutional reality remains deeply uneven across the globe, and nowhere is the gap between aspiration and practice as visible as in sub-Saharan Africa. Cameroon offers an instructive case study in this respect. In response to the international frameworks, the country has produced a legislative and policy architecture whose formal coherence leaves little to be desired:

a framework law on disability adopted in the very year of the Convention's ratification, a sector plan that elevates inclusion to a cross-cutting priority, and a constitution that affirms the protection of persons with disabilities. On paper, the edifice holds.

On the ground, matters stand otherwise. Institutional reports, research conducted in Cameroonian schools, and available field data converge on a single observation: inclusion remains, for the most part, a promise inscribed in documents that rarely reach the classroom. This article sets out to examine that distance methodically. The aim is not to denounce institutional hypocrisy, which would be both easy and unfair, but to understand the structure of the gap: to identify where, precisely, the chain that links the legal text to the child's school experience breaks, and why. That understanding is the precondition of any useful reform.

The approach forms part of a broader research programme on the schooling of children with autism spectrum disorder in the inclusive schools of Yaoundé. Autism is, in fact, a particularly demanding revealer of a system's real inclusive capacity: because it combines cognitive, sensory, behavioural, and relational needs that superficial accommodations cannot satisfy, it tests the depth, not merely the existence, of inclusion arrangements. What works for autism generally works for the whole spectrum of special educational needs; the reverse is not true.

Objectives Of The Study

This article pursues four complementary objectives.

The first is to render, accurately, the normative architecture of inclusive education in Cameroon, from the international and regional frameworks from which it derives to the national instruments that constitute it. It is important to take the measure of this edifice before evaluating its implementation, for a critique that ignored the strength of the legal framework would miss its target.

The second is to set that architecture against the institutional realities documented in the primary schools of Yaoundé, drawing on the available indicators: teacher training, infrastructure, screening and referral mechanisms, and intersectoral coordination.

The third is to analyse the structure of the gap between norm and practice, moving beyond mere description to identify the mechanisms that explain why sincere legal commitments fail to translate into observable change in the classroom.

The fourth, finally, is to formulate ranked recommendations, realistic in light of the constraints of the Cameroonian education system, capable of progressively narrowing the distance between the text and the classroom.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is a critical review. We chose that design deliberately, following the guidance of Grant and Booth (2009), because our object is the distance between a normative framework and its institutional realisation, not a measurable clinical or educational outcome. A meta-analysis would have been the wrong instrument: there is no common effect size to pool here. What the question calls for is interpretation, a reading that explains why sincere legal commitments fail to reach the classroom, and that is the work a critical review is built to do.

Search strategy. We assembled the documentary corpus between December 2023 and January 2026 through structured searches of several sources. For the scientific literature, we searched Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online. For the legal and policy instruments, we drew on the official repositories of the Cameroonian Ministry of Basic Education and on those of the United Nations, UNESCO, and the African Union. We then followed the reference lists of the documents already retrieved, both backward and forward, to catch sources the database searches had missed. The search terms paired the vocabulary of inclusive education (inclusive education, special educational needs, disability, autism) with terms for the setting (Cameroon, sub-Saharan Africa, Yaoundé) and for the object of inquiry (policy, legislation, teacher training, implementation). We ran every search in both English and French, as the country's bilingual documentary landscape requires.

Selection criteria. A document was retained when it met three conditions: it bore on inclusive education policy or practice in Cameroon, or in sub-Saharan Africa where a comparison was useful; its provenance could be identified well enough to judge its reliability; and it had appeared after 1994, the year of the Salamanca Statement. We set aside sources whose origin could not be traced and secondary reports that merely echoed claims we could not follow back to a verifiable source. Where accounts competed, we gave precedence to peer-reviewed studies and to primary legal instruments over secondary commentary.

Analytical procedure. We sorted the retained material into three strata, the international and regional instruments, the peer-reviewed literature, and the institutional and civil-society reports, and read them against one another. Triangulation was the working rule: each indicator advanced in the analysis rests, wherever the sources allowed, on the agreement of at least two documents of distinct origin, so that no single unverifiable source carries a claim on its own. The figures drawn from institutional reports are given as lower-bound estimates and orders of magnitude, since statistical collection in this setting remains fragmentary and any number should be read as a floor rather than a measurement.

Limitations. The review carries the limitations of the corpus it rests on. Recent primary studies conducted inside Cameroonian classrooms are scarce, and several of our indicators therefore depend on institutional reporting whose method cannot be checked from outside. The analysis is, for that reason, interpretive rather than confirmatory. Its conclusions are offered as a structured reading of the evidence now available and as the groundwork for the primary empirical research, gathering the voices of teachers, head teachers, parents, policymakers, and pupils with disabilities themselves, that the field still needs.

Analysis

International and regional frameworks: the source of the obligation

The Salamanca Statement and its legacy

Any serious analysis of the international normative framework begins with the UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education, held in Salamanca in 1994, which brought together the representatives of ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations to produce what has come to be known as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994). The text affirms, with unprecedented international authority, that ordinary schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, and building an inclusive society. It calls on governments to adopt inclusion as a principle of law and policy. Salamanca's significance owes less to its formulations than to the conceptual shift it effects. It moves international discourse from the medical model, which defines disability as an individual deficit calling for specialised remediation in a segregated setting, to the social model, which defines disability as the product of the mismatch between an individual's characteristics and the social and institutional environments in which that individual is expected to function. Within the social model, the appropriate response to a child who struggles to learn in an ordinary classroom is not to remove that child from the classroom and place him in a separate structure, but to transform the classroom so that it can accommodate his learning profile. Three decades on, this reversal has lost none of its force nor, it must be said, its largely unfinished character.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; United Nations, 2006), which entered into force in 2008 and has since been ratified by more than one hundred and eighty states, Cameroon among them in 2010, is the most binding international legal instrument on the rights of persons with disabilities, including educational rights. Its Article 24 is the most precise and demanding provision of international law on inclusive education: it requires states parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels, to provide reasonable accommodations, and to furnish, within the general education system, the support required for effective schooling.

General Comment No. 4 of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) clarified that Article 24 requires full and complete inclusion, not mere integration or token schooling. It explicitly rejects the interpretation that would allow states to maintain parallel systems of segregated special education as a compliance strategy. That interpretation has prompted debate in several African contexts, where segregated special education often represents the most developed form of school-based disability provision. It has nonetheless strengthened the legal and moral basis on which advocates rely in pressing for real, and not nominal, inclusion for all children with disabilities in Cameroon.

The Sustainable Development Goals and the African regional framework

The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by one hundred and ninety-three United Nations member states in September 2015, include a Goal 4 that commits the international community to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and to promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Target 4.5 calls specifically for the elimination of disparities and the guarantee of equal access to all levels of education for vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities. At the regional level, the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016-2025) establishes inclusive and equitable education as a strategic objective and calls on African governments to develop policies responsive to the needs of learners with disabilities and special educational needs (African Union, 2016). The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa (2018) further reinforces this regional normative basis. Cameroon's membership in the African Union and its adherence to these frameworks create an additional layer of accountability, at the continental scale, which remains insufficiently acknowledged in most national analyses of Cameroonian education reform.

The Cameroonian legal and policy architecture

Constitutional and legislative foundations

Cameroon's commitment to inclusive education, at the legislative level, has a history that partly precedes the international frameworks described above, even though its content and intensity have been progressively shaped by them. The 1996 Constitution affirms the state's attachment to the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities, establishing a constitutional basis for subsequent legislation. The Law on the Orientation of Education in Cameroon (Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998) laid down the fundamental principles of the national education system, including the commitment to universal primary education and the principle of equity in access to education, provisions later interpreted as encompassing the right of children with disabilities to access ordinary schooling. The central legislative instrument of Cameroonian disability law is Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities. Adopted in the same year as Cameroon's ratification of the CRPD, it represents the most comprehensive national legal framework in the country's history on the matter. In the field of education, its Article 28 provides that the state shall ensure, for persons with disabilities, schooling either in mainstream establishments or in specialised establishments or sections, according to procedures set by regulation. Article 29 obliges educational establishments to facilitate the access and reception of persons with disabilities, and Article 30 calls for the training of teachers in disability inclusion.

A tension in this text must be noted. Law No. 2010/002 does not mandate full inclusion in the sense of Article 24 of the CRPD and the General Comment that followed it: by explicitly recognising specialised establishments as an alternative to ordinary schooling, it leaves in place the logic of parallel systems that international law now tends to set aside. It nonetheless establishes a legal obligation on the state to provide educational access to all persons with disabilities, an obligation that encompasses children with autism whatever the form of provision. The framework exists; its conformity with the most recent international standards remains partial.

The Education and Training Sector Plan 2020-2030

The Education and Training Sector Plan (ETSP) 2020-2030 is the most current and ambitious strategic planning instrument of the Cameroonian government for the education sector. It establishes inclusive education as one of its cross-cutting strategic priorities, alongside gender equity, quality improvement, and decentralisation. Its

specific commitments on inclusion are precise: revision of initial teacher-training curricula to incorporate modules on inclusive pedagogy and special educational needs; development of a national strategy for the identification and school placement of children with disabilities; training of 20% of primary-school teachers in inclusive practices by 2025; and the establishment of resource rooms and adapted infrastructure in at least 30% of primary schools enrolling children with disabilities. These commitments mark a real advance in the ambition and precision of Cameroonian policy. But the Plan itself acknowledges the considerable gap that separates its strategic objectives from the actual state of implementation. The diagnostic conducted during its preparation establishes that teachers' knowledge of inclusive pedagogy was largely insufficient across all categories of the teaching corps, that adapted infrastructure was present in fewer than 3% of primary schools, that no systematic national process of screening or identification of children with disabilities existed, and that coordination between the education and health sectors, though crucial if children are to receive both a diagnosis and a school placement, remained weak and episodic (MINEDUB, 2019). A policy instrument that inscribes in the same document a high ambition and the observation of its own near-zero starting point offers, in negative, the best description of the gap this article sets out to analyse.

Institutional realities in the schools of Yaoundé

The real landscape of inclusive education

Yaoundé, the political capital and the country's second-largest urban area with a population of roughly four and a half million, concentrates the most developed educational infrastructure in Cameroon and the highest density of establishments that might be described as inclusive. Yet even in the capital, the landscape of real inclusive education, understood as schooling that adapts its pedagogy, physical environment, assessment practices, and social culture to accommodate children with special educational needs alongside their neurotypical peers, is considerably less developed than the official enrolment statistics and school-classification lists would suggest.

A mapping exercise conducted by MINEDUB (2019) in collaboration with civil-society organisations identified some thirty primary schools in Yaoundé that had formally enrolled at least one child with a recognised disability or special educational need during the previous school year. But of that set, fewer than half could be considered inclusive in any operational sense: in most cases, the enrolment of a child with special needs had occurred on an individual and improvised basis, without modification of the classroom environment, the pedagogical approach, or the assessment regime. The genuinely inclusive schools, those that had developed deliberate organisational policies, adapted physical spaces, mobilised trained support staff, and established systematic procedures for identifying and responding to individual needs, could be counted on the fingers of two hands across the entire city. This gap, between nominal enrolment and effective inclusion, is the first concrete manifestation of the phenomenon analysed here: the schooling of a child with a disability is recorded as an inclusive success even though it is accompanied by none of the transformations that inclusion presupposes.

The challenge of digital and material infrastructure

Access to functional infrastructure, whether adapted furniture, specific pedagogical materials, reliable electricity, or digital equipment, varies enormously from one school to another and traces a divide that imperfectly but significantly overlaps the cleavage between public and private schools, and between well-resourced and under-resourced establishments. Digital devices, in particular, do not arrive in a vacuum: they require a physical infrastructure, a human capacity for maintenance, a reliable power supply, and institutional support structures that cannot be taken for granted. Field observation shows that even the best-equipped schools in Yaoundé operate with significant margins of fragility: equipment donated by non-governmental organisations and then unevenly maintained for want of dedicated technical support, connectivity subject to intermittent interruptions, and dependence on the voluntary engagement of parents with technical skills. This finding carries a direct practical import and a theoretical significance. Practically, it establishes that a well-organised school, given modest institutional support, can sustain a functional material environment. Theoretically, it recalls that inclusion is never an abstract property of a text or a policy: it is a material reality, dependent on concrete conditions whose absence suffices to reduce the most sincere intention to nothing.

Teachers, the decisive agents of inclusion

The centrality of the teacher's role

Every serious analysis of the quality of inclusive education, whether conducted in high-income or low-income countries, arrives at the same fundamental conclusion: the quality of a child's inclusive school experience is determined above all by the knowledge, attitudes, and daily professional practices of the teacher in whose classroom that child spends most of the day (Florian, 2012; Sharma et al., 2012). Inclusion is not, at bottom, a matter of policy documents, physical infrastructure, or administrative classifications, even though all of these count. It is a matter of what a teacher does, minute by minute and day by day, in the relational space of the classroom: whether she notices that a child is struggling and responds with adapted support rather than irritation; whether she understands that the child's apparent inattention is a sensory and neurological response rather than a deliberate behavioural choice; whether she is able to differentiate her teaching so as to sustain real participation for a child whose profile departs markedly from the classroom norm.

The limits of the teacher-preparation system

Initial teacher preparation in Cameroon takes place chiefly in the Teacher Training Colleges (ENI) and, for teachers of higher qualification, at the Higher Teacher Training College of Yaoundé and its regional counterparts. An analysis of these establishments' curricula conducted by Ngo Melha (2018) yields a severe finding: the total time devoted to special educational needs and inclusive education in the standard programmes of initial training did not reach six hours across the entire two-year ENI course, and was wholly absent from some programmes. The content of those few hours, where they existed, was largely theoretical and centred on the classification of disability categories rather than on the pedagogical strategies and classroom-management approaches teachers actually need. No initial-training programme in the system required a practical placement with autistic children; no competency framework for inclusive teaching existed; no formal assessment of skills in inclusive pedagogy was included among the conditions of certification. The landscape of continuing professional development is equally underdeveloped. The ETSP's objective of training 20% of primary-school teachers in inclusive practices by 2025 is an ambitious commitment, but the effective infrastructure for delivering such training at scale, trained trainers, standardised content, financial support for teachers, institutional incentives, remained to be built. The few teachers who had received training had obtained it through isolated initiatives, funded by one-off projects, rather than through a national system. The distribution of inclusive competence across the Cameroonian teaching corps is therefore extremely uneven: concentrated in a small number of schools benefiting from active partnerships, and virtually absent from the vast majority of schools where autistic children are enrolled without any teacher having received specific preparation.

Teacher attitudes: a revealing paradox

Beyond formal preparation, the attitudes teachers bring to their work with autistic children are powerful determinants of the quality of inclusion. The international literature is consistent on this point: across countries and cultures, teachers' disposition to implement inclusive practices is strongly predicted by their sense of self-efficacy, that is, by their conviction that they possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources, more than by their abstract endorsement of inclusion as a principle (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin et al., 2009; Ahmmed et al., 2012).

Research conducted in Cameroonian primary schools documents a paradox consistent with this international picture. Ngo Melha (2018) finds that most Cameroonian teachers express positive abstract attitudes towards inclusive education, endorsing the principle that children with disabilities deserve to be educated alongside their peers, while simultaneously reporting high levels of anxiety, low self-efficacy, and notable practical resistance as soon as it comes to their own classroom and their own capacity to accommodate an autistic child. Teachers consistently identify the absence of training as the principal obstacle, followed by the absence of support staff, the burden of overcrowded classes, and the perceived incompatibility between inclusive pedagogy and the curriculum-coverage demands of the national examination system. This paradox, endorsement in principle and powerlessness in practice, lies at the heart of the gap analysed here: it shows that the conversion of attitudes is

not enough, and that without the sense of competence that only sustained training provides, goodwill remains without effect on practice.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The systematic confrontation between the normative architecture and the institutional realities yields three principal results.

A structured gap, not a mere delay

The first result is that the distance between norm and practice cannot be described as a simple implementation delay, a correct policy that has merely not yet had time to produce its effects. It has a structure. At every level of the chain that links the legal text to the child's experience, a necessary implementation condition is missing: the legal framework exists but does not mandate full inclusion; strategic planning sets targets but does not endow the mechanisms with their financing; schools enrol children but do not transform their practices; teachers endorse the principle but possess neither the training nor the support that would make endorsement operative. The gap is not an empty space; it is a succession of localised and identifiable ruptures.

Teacher preparation as the principal bottleneck

The second result is that, among these ruptures, teacher preparation occupies a privileged causal position. It is not one factor among others: it is the point on which the whole apparatus turns. Adapted infrastructure without a trained teacher remains underused; a perfect legal framework without a competent teacher remains a dead letter in the classroom; a screening mechanism that identified more children without teachers able to receive them would merely displace the problem. Conversely, a trained, supported teacher endowed with a sense of self-efficacy can, to a large extent, compensate for the shortcomings of the other links. Training is not the sufficient condition of inclusion, but it is the condition closest to necessity.

Contextual specificity as constitutive data

The third result is epistemological in nature. The findings obtained in high-income contexts, from which most of the literature on inclusive education originates, do not transfer freely to the Cameroonian context. The sociocultural representations of disability that shape care-seeking and access to diagnosis, the structural constraints of class size and teacher preparation, the infrastructural realities that determine what is materially possible, the political environment that conditions available resources: all these contextual factors are not mere background conditions to be mentioned and then set aside; they are constitutive features of the educational reality in which children with disabilities in Yaoundé live and learn. Any research that ignored them, or assumed them to have no bearing on the validity of its conclusions, would fail both as science and as a contribution to practice.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Inclusive schooling in Cameroon reads as an exemplary case of decoupling between the order of the text and the order of practice. The country possesses a legal and policy architecture whose formal coherence does credit to its drafters: a framework law, a protective constitution, an ambitious sector plan, and adherence to the most demanding international and regional instruments. This architecture is not a cynical façade; it reflects a real normative commitment. But it remains, for the most part, declarative, because the conditions of its implementation, foremost among them teacher preparation, the financing of mechanisms, and infrastructure, are not met. The central implication of this analysis is that the lever of reform no longer lies on the side of law. Cameroon does not, as a priority, need new laws or new commitments: it needs to make effective those it has already made. The displacement of the worksite, from the text towards the conditions of its realisation, is the most robust conclusion this examination permits. It calls for a reorientation of public effort and of researchers' attention towards the concrete links at which inclusion is won or lost, and singularly towards the classroom and towards the one who teaches in it.

The scope of this observation extends beyond the Cameroonian case alone. The configuration described here, an advanced normative framework superimposed on deficient implementation conditions, recurs in many education systems of sub-Saharan Africa. By documenting with precision the structure of the gap rather than its mere existence, the analysis offers a reading grid transferable to other contexts that share the same tension between legal ambition and material constraint.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are ranked according to the causal position of each lever in the implementation chain. They favour the achievable over the desirable and take account of the effective constraints of the Cameroonian education system.

First priority: teacher training. Replace one-off awareness sessions, whose ineffectiveness the literature establishes (Forlin et al., 2009), with sustained professional-development arrangements of a minimum of twenty to thirty hours spread across several sessions, anchored in the teacher's own classroom, including guided practice of precise pedagogical strategies and supported by a culture of collaborative learning among peers. This is the lever whose inclusive return is highest.

Second priority: financing the planned mechanisms. Endow with identified and durable financing the targets already inscribed in the ETSP 2020-2030, rather than adding new ones. A plan whose objectives are not budgeted remains a wish; the credibility of Cameroon's inclusive commitment will be measured by the budget line effectively assigned to it.

Third priority: intersectoral coordination. Establish stable liaison procedures between the health and education sectors, so that diagnosis and school placement cease to be two disconnected steps that families must link on their own. The weakness of this coordination, noted by the ETSP's own diagnostic (MINEDUB, 2019), is a rupture point reparable at moderate cost.

Fourth priority: screening and identification. Develop, even in an initially modest form, a national mechanism for the early detection of developmental disorders, without which the great majority of the children concerned will remain invisible to the school system. Identification is the gateway to everything else.

Fifth priority: community engagement. Accompany institutional reforms with work of community education and respectful dialogue with families, so as to reduce the sociocultural obstacles to care-seeking and schooling that technical measures alone cannot remove.

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