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DESIGNING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN ISRAEL: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

INTRODUCTION

Educational environments, both physical and pedagogical, are pivotal in shaping students' learning experiences, serving as the foundation for academic success, emotional growth, and social development. For students with disabilities, these environments play an even more critical role in fostering inclusion, engagement, and equitable access to education. Disabilities encompass a broad spectrum of cognitive, sensory, emotional, and behavioral challenges, which require the design and adaptation of learning spaces and teaching methods to address individual needs effectively (Lim & Fraser, 2018; Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2019).

The education system in Israel, similar to various countries worldwide, has been undergoing significant transformations in recent years (Natour, 2024). One of the most prominent changes has been the push towards greater inclusion of students with special educational needs into the mainstream education system (Natour, 2024; Tarantino et al., 2022). The concept of inclusive education, as enshrined in Israel's Special Education Law (1988), emphasizes the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms.

This legislation reflects a global shift toward equity and accessibility in education, aligning with principles such as those outlined in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations [UN], 2006). In Israel, this law provides a framework for creating tailored educational solutions, including specialized instruction, adaptive technologies, and complementary therapies. It aims to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities,

have access to the resources and opportunities necessary for success. However, the journey toward achieving effective integration of students with disabilities is fraught with challenges. Resource constraints, uneven distribution of infrastructure, and gaps in teacher preparedness hinder the full realization of inclusive education in Israel.

A study by Benade (2017) noted that while inclusive policies are well-intentioned, their success depends heavily on the alignment between policy directives and the realities of classroom implementation. Teachers often report a lack of sufficient training to manage the complexities of inclusive classrooms, highlighting the urgent need for professional development and systemic support (Tony, 2019). The physical environment of classrooms is a key determinant of students' learning experiences. Research shows that elements such as natural lighting, ergonomic seating, and optimal acoustics significantly enhance student focus, reduce sensory overload, and improve overall engagement. Fisher et al. (2014) found that minimizing distractions in the visual and auditory environment is particularly important for students with sensory sensitivities, such as those on the autism spectrum.

Flexible seating arrangements, such as standing desks or stability balls, provide movement-friendly options for students with attention or behavioral challenges, enabling them to stay engaged and productive (Harvey & Kenyon, 2013). Pedagogical strategies are equally essential in fostering an inclusive environment. The adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework for addressing diverse learning needs through flexible teaching methods, such as providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (Starcic, 2010). Assistive technologies, including text-to-speech software and adaptive keyboards, have been transformative for students with disabilities, allowing them to overcome barriers to learning and participate more fully in classroom activities (Tony, 2019).

This paper explores the interconnected roles of physical and pedagogical environments in advancing the educational outcomes of students with disabilities in Israel. Drawing on both theoretical foundations – such as Universal Design for Learning and constructivist educational models – and practical applications, it examines how inclusive education is implemented across different contexts in Israel. In addition to reviewing empirical studies and national policies, the paper presents real-world examples and initiatives that reflect Israel's efforts to promote equity and accessibility in schools. Through this integrated analysis, the study aims to offer actionable insights for educators and policymakers striving to create more effective and inclusive learning environments that empower all students to reach their full potential.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
IN ISRAEL AND WORLDWIDE

Inclusive education was formally endorsed on the global stage by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which emphasized the significance of involving all children- including those with disabilities – in inclusive educational settings. The declaration called for the development of mainstream schools capable of accommodating diverse learner needs and affirmed the principles of inclusive pedagogy, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities within general education systems. In Israel, inclusive education began with the Special Education Law of 1988, which guaranteed the right of students with disabilities to receive suitable educational support, including integration into regular classrooms when appropriate. Over time, the Israeli education system introduced integration committees and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to support this process. While the legal framework exists, actual implementation has varied significantly across regions and schools (Special Education Law, 1988). The amendment to the Special Education Law (2018) guaranteed a right to inclusion in regular settings, but there is a gap in implementation (Aderet-German, 2023). Recent research (Gal et al., 2025) suggests that teachers express a value commitment to inclusion but feel a lack of practical tools for managing a heterogeneous classroom. In contrast, in Poland, education laws allow for the inclusion of students with special needs in regular schools, but in practice there is a division between regular, integrative and special schools. Research by Głodkowska et al. (2022) suggests that the policy is in place, but implementation depends on local resources and support. Szumski et al. (2020) found that teacher and student attitudes towards inclusion are positive when there is professional training and support, and that students without special needs can also benefit from inclusion.

Inclusive design (ID) plays a critical role in shaping Israel's progress toward inclusive education. Rooted in the idea that learning environments should be proactively designed to accommodate all learners from the outset, ID emphasizes accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness. In Israel, the integration of inclusive design principles can be observed in the development of sensory-friendly classrooms, flexible learning spaces, and the use of assistive technologies. These elements aim to reduce physical, cognitive, and emotional barriers to learning. The implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and support from multidisciplinary integration committees further reflect an inclusive design mindset. However, the adoption of inclusive design remains inconsistent, often dependent on school location, leadership priorities, and available funding. Strengthening the systemic application of ID principles – through teacher

training, infrastructure upgrades, and inclusive curriculum development – offers a promising path toward realizing the full potential of inclusive education in Israel. Tony (2019) presents research on the role of assistive technologies in teacher training and curriculum adaptation, while Ministry of Aliyah and Integration (2019) describes policy recommendations on school infrastructure and inclusive programming.

DESIGNING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AS A CHALLENGE FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

The physical environment of classrooms is a critical factor influencing the learning experiences and outcomes of students, particularly those with disabilities. Research consistently shows that the design of learning spaces, including elements such as lighting, acoustics, and spatial arrangements, directly impacts cognitive, emotional, and social development (See, for example: Fisher, et al., 2014; Starcic, 2010). For instance, natural lighting has been linked to increased focus and reduced fatigue, contributing to a more engaging and conducive learning environment (Fisher et al., 2014). Conversely, poor acoustics can create significant barriers for students, particularly those with auditory processing disorders, by impairing communication and comprehension (Bateman & Soifer, 2015). These findings highlight the necessity of addressing sensory and spatial factors in the design of inclusive classrooms.

Flexible seating arrangements are another essential component of inclusive learning environments. Adaptable furniture, such as standing desks, wobble stools, and stability balls, allows students to choose configurations that best align with their learning styles and physical needs. This flexibility not only promotes autonomy and comfort but also fosters engagement and reduces behavioral disruptions (Harvey & Kenyon, 2013). For students with sensory sensitivities, options such as quiet corners and sensory-friendly zones equipped with soft textures and dimmed lighting provide a safe retreat, enabling them to self-regulate and remain focused on their learning tasks (Fisher et al., 2014).

While the physical environment creates the foundation for inclusive education, pedagogical strategies are equally important in addressing the diverse needs of students. Inclusive teaching practices emphasize the importance of differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and Universal Design for Learning.

Differentiated instruction involves tailoring teaching methods and materials to meet the unique needs of each student, ensuring that all learners can access the curriculum effectively. Cooperative learning encourages peer collaboration,

fostering a sense of community and mutual support within the classroom (Lim & Fraser, 2018). These strategies are particularly effective in mainstream classrooms where students with disabilities learn alongside their typically developing peers. The UDL framework provides a comprehensive approach to inclusive teaching by offering multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. This model recognizes that students learn in diverse ways and emphasizes the need for flexible teaching methods. For example, providing audio versions of texts, visual aids, and hands-on activities ensures that students with various learning preferences can engage meaningfully with the material (Starcic, 2010). Assistive technologies, such as text-to-speech software and adaptive keyboards, further enhance access to education, enabling students with disabilities to overcome barriers and participate fully in classroom activities (Tony, 2019).

Israel's approach to inclusive education provides valuable examples of how the integration of physical and pedagogical strategies can transform learning environments. Sensory-friendly classrooms in cities like Haifa are equipped with muted lighting, soundproofing, and flexible workstations, creating an optimal setting for students with sensory sensitivities. These classrooms have demonstrated significant improvements in students' academic performance and emotional well-being, underscoring the importance of tailored physical environments (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2019). Collaborative projects between mainstream and special education schools also exemplify the potential of inclusive practices. Programs that pair students with disabilities with their typically developing peers have been successful in fostering empathy, improving social skills, and reducing stigma. For example, initiatives in Tel Aviv that encourage peer mentoring and shared learning activities have shown positive outcomes for both groups of students (Bateman & Soifer, 2015).

Despite these successes, challenges remain in fully implementing inclusive education in Israel. Many schools face resource constraints, particularly in peripheral regions where funding for infrastructure and training is limited. Teachers often report feeling underprepared to address the complexities of diverse classrooms, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development and systemic support (Lim & Fraser, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes increased investment in education, enhanced teacher training programs, and community partnerships to bridge resource gaps. To ensure the continued advancement of inclusive education, policymakers and educators must prioritize the alignment of physical and pedagogical strategies. By integrating adaptive classroom designs with innovative teaching methods, schools can create environments that empower all students, regardless of their abilities, to achieve their full potential.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN EDUCATION

Universal Design for Learning is an educational framework that promotes the development of flexible learning environments capable of accommodating diverse learner needs. Originating from principles in architecture and design, UDL applies the idea of accessibility to educational contexts by offering multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (Meyer et al., 2014). While the core principles remain consistent, the application of UDL varies widely across countries and school systems. In some settings, UDL is embedded within national education policies, while in others it is adopted at the school level through teacher training and classroom experimentation. In Israel, UDL practices are implemented unevenly; some schools integrate assistive technologies, adaptive seating, and differentiated instruction, while others face structural or pedagogical barriers. Despite these variations, the UDL framework serves as a critical tool for advancing inclusive education and ensuring that teaching methods align with the diverse ways students learn.

These principles of UDL align closely with broader pedagogical approaches that emphasize student-centered learning, such as constructivism and experiential education, which further reinforce the importance of flexible and inclusive environments.

Constructivism and experiential learning

Constructivist theories of education, as articulated by theorists like Piaget and Vygotsky, stress the importance of active engagement and social interaction in learning. These theories argue that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed by learners through interaction with their environment and peers. For students with disabilities, this means that classroom environments must be designed to facilitate participation, collaboration, and hands-on learning experiences. John Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning further underscores the necessity of engaging students through meaningful, real-world tasks that connect their educational experiences to their personal lives and future aspirations (Dewey, 1907).

In inclusive classrooms, experiential learning can be achieved by designing activities that cater to a wide range of abilities. For instance, incorporating tactile materials, visual aids, and interactive technologies allows students to explore concepts in ways that align with their individual strengths. This approach fosters a deeper understanding of the subject matter and promotes a sense of inclusion and belonging among all students (Lim & Fraser, 2018).

Environment and the neuroscience

The educational principles of UDL and constructivism are increasingly supported by findings from neuroscience, which offer empirical evidence on how different environments influence learning processes in the brain. Recent advancements in neuroscience have provided valuable insights into how the brain processes information and how environmental factors influence learning. Research indicates that the physical design of learning spaces – such as lighting, acoustics, and spatial arrangements – affects not only cognitive development but also emotional and social well-being. For example, natural lighting has been shown to enhance attention and reduce stress, while poor acoustics can disrupt communication and hinder comprehension, particularly for students with sensory processing challenges (Fisher et al., 2014). The connection between the environment and the brain's ability to adapt and learn highlights the importance of creating inclusive physical spaces. Studies have demonstrated that classrooms with flexible seating arrangements and sensory-friendly designs improve engagement and reduce disruptive behaviors among students with disabilities.

These findings align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning, which advocate for designing educational environments that accommodate diverse learning styles and needs (Starcic, 2010). UDL also emphasizes the role of technology in enhancing learning for students with disabilities. Assistive technologies, such as screen readers, speech recognition software, and adaptive keyboards, enable students to overcome barriers and participate fully in classroom activities. These tools not only support academic achievement but also promote independence and self-confidence (Starcic, 2010). Successful implementation of UDL principles ultimately depends on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of teachers, who are responsible for translating inclusive frameworks into everyday instruction.

The role of teachers and professional development

Teachers are central to the successful implementation of inclusive education. Their ability to design and deliver instruction that meets the diverse needs of their students depends on their understanding of inclusive pedagogical strategies and their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

Professional development programs that focus on inclusive practices, such as differentiated instruction and cooperative learning, equip teachers with the tools they need to create equitable learning environments (Benade, 2017; Tony, 2019).

However, many educators report feeling underprepared to manage the complexities of inclusive classrooms. This underscores the need for systemic support, including access to resources, collaborative planning opportunities, and ongoing training. Research suggests that when teachers are confident in their ability to meet the needs of all students, they are more likely to adopt innovative practices and foster positive learning outcomes (Lim & Fraser, 2018).

The theoretical frameworks discussed above – namely, Universal Design for Learning, constructivism, experiential learning, and cognitive neuroscience – provide a strong foundation for understanding the principles of inclusive education. By integrating these theories with practical strategies, educators can create environments that not only support academic success but also nurture the emotional and social development of students with disabilities. This holistic approach to education aligns with the growing recognition that inclusive practices benefit all students by promoting empathy, collaboration, and a deeper appreciation of diversity (Harvey & Kenyon, 2013).

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

Israel's educational system reflects a unique blend of progressive legislation and cultural diversity, aiming to ensure inclusive education for all students. Central to this effort is the Special Education Law (1988), which guarantees access to tailored educational solutions for students with disabilities. The law emphasizes inclusion, stipulating that, whenever possible, children with disabilities should be integrated into mainstream classrooms rather than segregated into special education settings. This approach aligns with global trends toward inclusive education, underscoring the importance of equity and accessibility in educational policies (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2019).

The Special Education Law provides a framework for integrating students with diverse needs into the general education system. It mandates that each child be assessed by a multidisciplinary team, which includes educators, psychologists, and healthcare professionals. Based on this evaluation, an individualized education plan (IEP) is developed, outlining the student's specific needs, accommodations, and goals (Bateman & Soifer, 2015). The law also ensures that schools receive funding for resources such as teaching assistants, specialized training for educators, and assistive technologies. In addition to the Special Education Law, Israel's Integration Committees play a crucial role in facilitating inclusion. These committees, established in schools across the country, assess the needs of students with disabilities and recommend appropriate interventions, such as placement in mainstream classrooms with support services or enrollment in specialized pro-

grams (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2019). The goal is to create a continuum of care that addresses the varying needs of students, from mild learning disabilities to more complex challenges.

Inclusion programs and initiatives

Several initiatives in Israel exemplify the country's commitment to inclusive education. For example, the "Shiluv" (Integration) program focuses on integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools while providing them with individualized support. This program has been particularly successful in urban areas like Tel Aviv and Haifa, where resources and infrastructure are more readily available (Bateman & Soifer, 2015).

Another notable initiative is the use of inclusive teaching models, such as co-teaching, where general and special education teachers collaborate to design and deliver lessons that cater to a wide range of abilities. This approach not only enhances learning outcomes for students with disabilities but also fosters a more inclusive classroom culture, benefiting all students (Benade, 2017). Additionally, specialized teacher training programs, such as the "Teacher as Innovator" initiative, equip educators with the skills to implement inclusive practices and utilize adaptive technologies effectively (Tony, 2019).

Challenges and successes associated with the implementation of inclusive education in Israel

Despite these advancements, the implementation of inclusive education in Israel faces several challenges. A significant barrier is the unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural areas. Schools in peripheral regions often lack the funding, infrastructure, and trained personnel necessary to support students with disabilities effectively (Lim & Fraser, 2018). Furthermore, many teachers report feeling underprepared to manage the complexities of inclusive classrooms, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs (Bateman & Soifer, 2015). Cultural attitudes toward disability also play a role in shaping the effectiveness of inclusive practices. While awareness and acceptance of disabilities have improved in recent years, stigma and misconceptions persist in some communities. These attitudes can affect not only the willingness of schools to embrace inclusion but also the level of parental involvement and advocacy for students' rights (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2019).

Despite these challenges, there are numerous success stories that demonstrate the potential of inclusive education in Israel. One such example is the integration of sensory-friendly classrooms in Haifa. These classrooms are designed with fea-

tures such as muted lighting, soundproofing, and flexible seating arrangements, creating an environment that is conducive to learning for students with sensory sensitivities. These classrooms have shown significant improvements in students' academic performance and emotional well-being (Fisher et al., 2014). Another success story involves collaborative projects between mainstream schools and special education centers. These initiatives, often supported by NGOs, provide opportunities for peer mentoring and joint learning activities, fostering mutual understanding and reducing stigma. For instance, in Tel Aviv, a program that pairs students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with neurotypical peers has been praised for its positive impact on both groups, enhancing social skills and empathy (Tony, 2019).

DISCUSSION

This article set out to explore how inclusive learning environments – both physical and pedagogical – contribute to the development of students with disabilities, with a focus on the Israeli education system. While the theoretical frameworks provide strong foundations, the discussion must now turn to the practical challenges and unresolved tensions that arise in implementation. Although Universal Design for Learning presents a promising vision for inclusivity, its practical application is far from straightforward. UDL reframes inclusion by asking what high-quality education should look like for everyone – not just for students with disabilities. In this sense, sensory or technical barriers are treated on par with motivational, emotional, and cognitive ones. However, translating UDL into practice presents significant challenges. Educators often lack the training and resources needed to implement UDL meaningfully, and institutional adoption can be superficial limited to checklists or isolated tools without deeper pedagogical change (Scott, 2018). In Israel, these challenges are compounded by disparities in school funding and infrastructure, particularly between urban centers and peripheral areas. Without comprehensive professional development and system-level support, UDL risks becoming a theoretical ideal rather than a practical tool for equity in education (Nilholm, 2020).

In parallel, research has highlighted the importance of physical classroom settings, emphasizing that elements such as lighting, acoustics, and flexible seating significantly influence students' cognitive, emotional, and social engagement (Fisher et al., 2014). While some Israeli schools have integrated sensory-friendly designs, many still lack the resources or infrastructure to do so, especially in underserved regions. These disparities reflect broader systemic inequalities that must be addressed. Educators are central to advancing inclusive

education, yet many report feeling underprepared to meet the diverse needs of students. Despite the available training initiatives, gaps in teacher preparedness persist. As Lim & Fraser (2018) notes, confidence and competence in inclusive strategies are crucial to meaningful practice. Professional development programs must therefore be continuous, collaborative, and integrated into everyday school culture.

The Israeli case offers both encouraging developments and persistent challenges. The Special Education Law (1988) laid a foundation for inclusion, and initiatives like sensory-friendly classrooms and joint learning projects between mainstream and special education schools exemplify progress. However, the unequal distribution of resources, especially in rural areas, continues to hinder equitable implementation (Bateman & Soifer, 2015). From a scholarly perspective, while many articles praise inclusive frameworks, doubts remain. For example, Roski et al. (2021) question whether UDL principles can be consistently applied in all subjects, particularly in science instruction. This highlights the need for further empirical research and context-specific evaluation.

Looking ahead, Israel has the potential to lead in inclusive education by prioritizing equitable funding, enhancing teacher training, and leveraging technology to support diverse learners. Public awareness campaigns may also help reduce stigma and build community support. However, these efforts must be sustained and critically assessed over time.

CONCLUSIONS

The interplay between physical and pedagogical environments is fundamental to the advancement of inclusive education for students with disabilities. The evidence presented underscores that well-designed learning spaces, coupled with innovative teaching strategies, can significantly enhance academic, social, and emotional outcomes for these students. Physical adaptations, such as sensory-friendly designs, flexible seating, and improved acoustics, create environments that foster comfort and engagement, enabling students with disabilities to fully participate in classroom activities. These adjustments align with research emphasizing the role of the environment in promoting focus, reducing overstimulation, and supporting overall well-being (Fisher et al., 2014).

Equally critical are the pedagogical strategies employed by educators. Frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning and approaches like differentiated instruction ensure that teaching methods cater to the diverse needs of students. By embracing flexibility in representation, engagement, and assessment, educators can create inclusive spaces that accommodate a wide range of learning styles

and abilities. The integration of assistive technologies further bridges gaps in accessibility, empowering students to overcome barriers and achieve their potential (Starcic, 2010).

The Israeli experience highlights both the potential and the challenges of inclusive education. Progressive legislation, such as the Special Education Law (1988), has laid a strong foundation for inclusion, while programs like sensory-friendly classrooms and collaborative projects exemplify successful implementation. However, significant challenges persist, particularly in resource allocation and teacher preparedness. Addressing these systemic issues is essential to ensuring that all students, regardless of ability or geographic location, receive equitable educational opportunities (Bateman & Soifer, 2015).

Looking forward, the path to effective inclusion requires sustained collaboration among educators, policymakers, and communities. Policymakers must prioritize funding for inclusive practices, expand professional development programs, and address resource disparities between urban and rural schools. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns can help reduce stigma and foster a culture of acceptance and empathy, which is critical for the long-term success of inclusive education.

In conclusion, inclusive education is not merely a legislative or institutional goal – it is a moral imperative. By continuing to innovate and address existing challenges, educators and policymakers can create learning environments that not only support students with disabilities but also enrich the broader educational experience for all learners. The integration of physical and pedagogical strategies offers a powerful framework for building a more equitable and inclusive future in education.

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Summary

The aim of the article is to point out the importance of designing the learning environment in the classroom as a strategy for the development of inclusive education, with particular emphasis on the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classes.

Starting from the understanding of inclusion as caring for the high quality of learning and teaching processes concerning each student, including children with disabilities, the principles of Universal Learning Design (UDL) were presented, referring to the postulates of ensuring physical comfort for learners, the possibility of acquiring knowledge through the diversity of information media during didactic classes, different forms of motivating students to work, the opportunity for them to present their educational achievements, but also ensuring the psychophysical well-being of children, social integration, and personalization.

The article, pointing to the changes taking place in the education system in Israel, also shows the importance of inclusive design, which allows for the creation of a learning environment based, among other things, on principles that take into account the diversity of students, removing barriers to education (enabling high-quality education for all), planning and organizing cognitive tasks, and ways for teachers to evaluate their effects in a way that prevents the stigmatization of students.