

Integrating Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder into Society: Strategies and Challenges

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Abstract. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in communication, sensory processing, and behaviour. It makes social integration a pressing moral and policy priority worldwide. This paper examines the inclusion of individuals with ASD across three key domains: education, employment, and community life. It also considers the role of policy and resource allocation in shaping outcomes. Employing a secondary analysis of existing data, the study synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and advocacy publications produced over the past fifteen years to provide a comprehensive overview of barriers, best practices, and systemic reforms. The analysis reveals that inclusive education models, workplace initiatives such as SAP's Autism at Work, and community-based programs significantly enhance opportunities for participation, but their effectiveness is unevenly distributed. Structural inequalities, resource scarcity, and cultural stigma continue to limit access, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts. The study concludes that sustainable inclusion requires more than legislative mandates: it demands systemic change through teacher training, employer engagement, sensory-friendly environments, stronger policy enforcement, and participatory, cross-cultural research. Ultimately, advancing neurodiversity requires coordinated action across sectors to dismantle barriers and foster equitable opportunities for individuals with ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Inclusive Education, Employment Initiatives, Policy Recommendations.

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterized by diverse differences in communication, sensory processing, and behaviour [1]. Over the past four decades, the neurodiversity movement has reframed autism from a deficit-centred diagnosis to a natural variation in human cognition, emphasizing dignity, equal rights, and opportunities for autistic individuals [2]. Within this shifting paradigm, inclusion has emerged as a central concept, demonstrating that with appropriate support, people with autism can thrive in education, employment, and community life. Nevertheless, despite legislative advances such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) in the United States and the Autism Act (2009) in the United Kingdom, systemic and cultural barriers persist. Schools often lack trained staff and adequate resources to

support neurodiverse learners, workplaces are frequently unprepared to integrate autistic employees, and community spaces rarely account for sensory needs. These gaps highlight the limitations of legislation alone and underscore the necessity of structural and cultural change to realize meaningful inclusion.

Globally, inclusive practices reveal a mixed picture. Evidence from high-income countries shows that when inclusive education is properly implemented, autistic students achieve notable academic and social gains, while corporate initiatives such as SAP's Autism at Work program demonstrate how neurodiversity can strengthen organizational problem-solving and analytical capacity. However, these successes are typically confined to resource-rich contexts, leaving low- and middle-income communities with limited access to diagnosis, services, and inclusive opportunities. This uneven distribution underscores the urgent need for scalable, evidence-based strategies that can adapt to different cultural and economic environments.

Against this backdrop, the present study critically examines how systemic barriers inhibit the inclusion of individuals with ASD in education, employment, and community life, while also identifying and evaluating global best practices that can inform the development of sustainable strategies across diverse regions and sectors. To achieve this, the study employs a secondary research design, synthesizing evidence from peer-reviewed journals, government publications, and advocacy reports produced over the past fifteen years. This approach provides both qualitative and quantitative insights, enabling a comprehensive understanding of barriers, policy frameworks, and intervention models.

The objectives of this research are fourfold: first, to analyze the systemic barriers that constrain the inclusion of individuals with ASD across education, employment, and community domains; second, to evaluate evidence-based practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in promoting inclusion; third, to identify methodological and structural gaps in current research and practice; and fourth, to propose scalable and context-sensitive strategies that can inform policy and practice globally.

2. Literature review

2.1. Early intervention and developmental outcomes

Since the early 1990s, research on the inclusion of autistic individuals has gradually expanded from early developmental interventions to school-based practices and later extended to employment and community participation. At each stage, systematic reviews have synthesized the main advances. One major review covering the years 1990 to 2017 screened 31,779 records and included 567 studies. Across three successive iterations of the literature review, 972 articles were integrated, yielding 28 evidence-based practices primarily for children and adolescents [3].

A consistent body of evidence shows that early intervention can substantially improve developmental, social, and cognitive outcomes for autistic children. Interventions initiated during the preschool years are strongly associated with significant gains in adaptive behaviour and communication skills [4-6]. Typical approaches include speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioural methods, each designed to address developmental barriers before they become entrenched.

Longitudinal studies reaffirm these findings, showing that adolescents who received intensive early intervention are more likely to enter mainstream education and demonstrate superior adaptive skills [7-9]. Such conclusions underscore the importance of early engagement, highlighting its long-term dividends for socialization and education. At the methodological level, reviews have included

both single-case and group designs, relying on systematic review rather than meta-analysis. While this approach broadened the scope of available evidence, it limited the precision of effect size estimation [3].

As individuals move into adulthood, however, the evidence base narrows considerably. An updated Campbell review identified only three rigorous intervention trials reporting employment outcomes, underscoring the restricted and highly concentrated nature of the trial base. Research on community participation emerged later and remains relatively limited [10]. Moreover, access to interventions is uneven across contexts. In settings with limited personnel or unstable funding, it is difficult to implement evidence-based practices with fidelity, reinforcing disparities in educational attainment and transitional outcomes.

2.2. Classroom practices and inclusive education

Inclusive education has been widely identified in the literature as a key approach to achieving both academic and social outcomes for children with autism. Placing children in mainstream classrooms reduces stigma, encourages peer learning, and promotes reciprocal social interactions [11, 12]. Teachers play a crucial role, as their training and capacity-building in implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are critical determinants of successful inclusion.

Classroom modifications such as differentiated pedagogies, utilization of sensory equipment, and small-group class settings have been shown to be effective strategies. Researchers in high-income countries report higher success rates with inclusive approaches, largely due to stronger training and resource allocation. In contrast, low-resourced schools often struggle with large class sizes and insufficient support, both of which undermine consistency and effectiveness [13, 14]. This comparison highlights the dependence of inclusive education on systemic resourcing.

A recent qualitative systematic review conducted under Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, drawing on 108 studies, further illustrates this imbalance. While the majority of research concentrated on school-level strategies and teacher attitudes, only 16 studies explicitly addressed classroom-level practices. Across contexts, however, the professional development of autism-specialized teachers consistently emerged as the most critical facilitator of inclusion [15]. Importantly, classroom strategies aligned with established evidence-based interventions—such as prompting, reinforcement, and peer-mediated support—offer a practical bridge between intervention science and routine teaching.

2.3. Research limitations and methodological gaps

A major issue identified in the reviewed literature concerns the limited global applicability of current findings. Much of the research has been conducted in high-income regions such as North America and Europe, resulting in cultural and economic biases. Conversely, low- and middle-income countries face persistent inequities in accessing support services due to delayed diagnoses, limited awareness, and underdeveloped legislative frameworks.

Another limitation lies in the research design. Much existing knowledge is based on quantitative indicators such as employment levels, academic performance, and service uptake. While informative, these measures fail to adequately capture the lived experiences of autistic individuals. Qualitative studies can provide richer insights, yet they remain relatively rare and often reflect parental perspectives rather than those of autistic individuals themselves [16]. This imbalance underscores the urgent need for more participatory and culturally diverse methodologies. The weakness is particularly evident in adult employment. An updated Campbell systematic review

identified only three studies that reported actual employment outcomes under experimental or quasi-experimental criteria; the evidence base was too small to permit a meta-analysis and underscores the need for trials designed for scale and for transfer across settings [17]. Research on community participation shows a similar pattern. A systematic review covering diverse forms of participation, yet most were assessed as carrying moderate to high risk of bias, with heterogeneous measurement methods that reduced the validity of cross-setting comparisons [10]. Taken together, field assessments call for a shift from fragmented pilot projects to approaches that are both scalable and equitable, while also emphasizing the meaningful involvement of autistic individuals themselves.

Moreover, policy analysis often lacks meaningful practitioner input. Many studies rely on policy document reviews, which, although peer-reviewed, fail to incorporate the experiential knowledge of frontline practitioners responsible for implementation. This gap is significant given the high risks of policy failure for vulnerable groups. Incorporating practitioners' perspectives may provide more grounded insights into barriers to implementation, such as budgetary constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, and the limited capacity of frontline staff—factors often overlooked in high-level analyses.

3. Results and findings

The findings below indicate that while inclusive initiatives can significantly improve participation and outcomes, their success is highly uneven and contingent on structural, cultural, and resource-related conditions.

3.1. Classroom practices and inclusive education

There is substantial empirical evidence supporting the idea that the inclusive models of education, supporting the effectiveness of inclusive education models, especially the use of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), in enhancing academic performance, social interaction, and adaptive skills among students with ASD [18]. These positive effects are most pronounced in school systems that provide access to well-trained teachers, specialized support personnel, and manageable class sizes. For example, autistic students demonstrate greater academic participation and peer interaction in countries where autism-specific training is mandated as part of teacher preparation programs and sufficient support staff are available in classrooms [18]. By contrast, in low-resource settings, particularly rural or low-income districts, such benefits are diminished. Overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher training, and inadequate funding reduce opportunities for individualized instruction, leaving many students without the necessary support [19]. These results imply that inclusive education policies are essential, but their effectiveness depends on sustained funding, continuous professional development for teachers, and institutional support for individualized assistance.

Across the material reviewed, accounts that describe teacher professional learning, routine use of classroom adaptations (e.g., visual supports, structured prompting), and clear IEP processes also tend to describe steadier day-to-day participation. This descriptive co-occurrence aligns with multi-wave reviews that catalogue a set of focused classroom practices repeatedly associated with improved outcomes.

3.2. Employment initiatives

Employment outcomes reveal considerable disparities. Programs such as SAP's Autism at Work initiative illustrate how neurodiversity programs can leverage the strengths of individuals with ASD, particularly in software testing, data analytics, and quality assurance [18]. These successes are

largely attributable to the substantial resources multinational corporations can allocate to specialized recruitment, workplace accommodations, and ongoing support services. For instance, SAP's program integrates multi-phase recruitment adaptation, mentorship, and performance evaluation, resulting in retention rates of employees with ASD that exceed industry averages.

In contrast, reports from small and medium-sized enterprises more often describe temporary adjustments, limited capacity within human resource departments to provide sustained mentoring, and difficulties in formalizing job customization or onboarding processes [19]. As a result, rigorous employment evaluations remain scarce, with most studies concentrated in resource-rich corporate environments. In the limited number of randomized assessments, such as Project SEARCH plus ASD Supports, participants in the intervention group achieved significantly higher rates of competitive employment at program completion or shortly thereafter [17].

3.3. Community programs

Community-based initiatives also play a critical role in fostering inclusion. Autism-friendly environments, sensory-adapted public spaces, and support networks have been reported to reduce distress and support participation [18]. For instance, a randomized crossover trial of sensory-adapted dental environments documented lower physiological and behavioural distress for autistic children during cleanings compared to standard rooms [19]. At a population-facing level, the UK National Autistic Society's Autism Hour campaign recorded participation by over 14,000 businesses in 2019, indicating wide adoption of predictable adjustments in retail and service venues; however, standardized outcome metrics across sites remain limited [20].

Nevertheless, access to such programs remains highly uneven. Well-resourced urban areas with strong advocacy networks are more likely to sustain inclusive initiatives, whereas rural and under-resourced communities often lack the organizational capacity or policy support necessary for implementation [19]. Successful cases commonly feature predictable sensory environments (e.g., lighting, sound, and queuing), alongside clear visual guidance and staff training. Recurrent barriers include service discontinuity, transportation challenges, and financial constraints, which together limit scalability and sustainability.

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that a recurrent pattern emerges across education, employment, and community: outcomes improve when support is routine, structured, and resourced, but falter when provision is intermittent or symbolic. These descriptive findings point to deeper systemic determinants that shape inclusion. In other words, such disparities in inclusion are not incidental but instead reflect underlying systemic determinants rather than isolated programmatic weaknesses. Therefore, the findings highlight three interacting determinants that explain the divergences reported above: a persistent gap between legal commitments and the routines that enact them, pronounced inequalities in financial and human resources, and the enduring influence of cultural stigma on expectations and behaviour. Unless these conditions are addressed together, reforms risk remaining declaratory; only by closing the implementation gap, reducing resource disparities, and reshaping norms can policy be translated into sustained and equitable inclusion [21].

4.1. The gap between legislation and implementation

Political recognition of autistic rights is well documented in legislative measures such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the Autism Act (2009) [21]. Nevertheless, a substantial gap persists between legislative commitments and their practical realization. Although such legislation mandates inclusive education, accessible workplaces, and anti-discrimination protections, schools, employers, and communities often fail to meet these obligations due to insufficient infrastructure and institutional support [22].

For instance, inclusive education policies require the implementation of IEPs. However, in under-resourced districts, limited teacher training and shortages of instructional materials severely restrict effective delivery [5]. In rural districts, teachers who carry multiple IEPs often receive minimal autism-specific coaching, share limited sensory resources, and rarely conduct mid-year plan adjustments. Visual schedules are not refreshed, prompting routines lapse outside of core subjects, and peer supports rotate without preparation, so formal plans exist, but classroom fidelity is inconsistent. Similarly, while employment law prohibits discrimination, many small and medium-sized enterprises lack the guidance mechanisms, reporting channels, and financial capacity necessary to advance inclusive recruitment and workplace adaptation [19]. Small firms without dedicated HR staff attempt ad hoc interview adjustments and onboarding, but cannot sustain job coaching, and lack templates for task carving or staged induction, which leads to stalled onboarding and an increased risk of turnover. Bridging this gap, therefore, requires not only legal mandates but enforceable resource-oriented frameworks that establish measurable and practical delivery standards [22]. Reviews in education also emphasize that successful policy implementation depends on teachers' daily skills, coaching, and planning time, investments that are not automatically ensured by legislative mandates [3]. Teacher professional development and practical classroom adjustments emerge as the most frequently cited enablers at the school level. Accordingly, legislation must be institutionally anchored with funding and capacity-building measures; without this alignment, rights risk remaining largely symbolic.

4.2. Resource inequality and structural disadvantage

The second inconsistency lies in the unequal distribution of resources, which determines who benefits from inclusion initiatives [18]. Successful models—such as inclusive schools in Sweden and Canada, or corporate neurodiversity programs like SAP's Autism at Work—have primarily been implemented in well-resourced contexts with high institutional capacity [19].

By contrast, rural areas, underfunded schools, and smaller organizations lack the financial, technical, and organizational infrastructure to replicate such successes [15]. Schools frequently lack autism-trained staff, have limited access to core instructional and sensory materials, and have too little protected time for coaching and mid-year IEP review. Consequently, classroom practices such as visual supports, structured prompting, and peer-mediated approaches are implemented inconsistently, and progress monitoring is sporadic, weakening the impact of inclusion. This disparity perpetuates marginalization as underserved groups remain excluded from advocacy, training, and support services. Addressing this inequity requires systemic redistribution of resources and targeted capacity-building in high-need contexts [22]. Practical measures include establishing dedicated funding for rural schools and creating policy incentives that encourage small employers to adopt low-cost adaptations. These approaches represent feasible pathways to reduce participation gaps [18]. A leading example is Project Search plus ASD Supports, which produced significantly higher competitive employment rates in the intervention group [17].

Although these results demonstrate promising outcomes, they also expose design limitations. Many effective models are highly resource-intensive and cannot be readily adopted by small enterprises or rural systems without adjustment. Therefore, future policy should prioritize tiered and low-burden alternatives—such as simplified job customization templates, rotating “day mentors,” or concise standardized adaptation checklists—supported by subsidies to lower risks for small organizations.

4.3. Cultural stigma as a hidden obstacle

Social norms and collective expectations shape whether support measures translate into meaningful participation. Evidence on adult community inclusion indicates that responsive cues and predictable environments are linked to higher engagement, although heterogeneity across studies and risks of bias limit generalizability [10]. For example, participation tends to be higher when programs schedule quiet hours in public venues, provide clear visual signage for navigation, and train staff to anticipate sensory sensitivities, compared with unstructured settings. Cultural stigma and entrenched norms of neurotypicality remain major obstacles to inclusion [16]. Stigma shapes teachers’ expectations, employers’ perceptions, and community attitudes, framing autism and neurodiversity as deficits rather than natural variations of human experience. These prejudices undermine inclusion efforts at both interpersonal and institutional levels, even when supportive legislation and resources are in place.

For instance, teachers may formally implement IEPs yet still hold low expectations for autistic students, thereby restricting their participation [18]. Similarly, employers may comply with diversity regulations while failing to meaningfully integrate neurodiverse employees into workplace culture. Importantly, stigma often intersects with socioeconomic and cultural disadvantage, amplifying exclusion in rural, minority, and low-income contexts. Addressing these challenges requires cultural transformation to normalize neurodiversity, including public awareness campaigns, participatory research that amplifies autistic voices, and early education initiatives aimed at dismantling stereotypes [22]. Practical experience shows that projects involving autistic individuals in co-design are more likely to identify low-cost and high-return adjustments. This co-creative orientation is increasingly emphasized in professional guidelines as a sustainable pathway toward genuine inclusion.

4.4. Toward critical and sustainable inclusion

In short, overcoming these contradictions requires system-level change. Policy initiatives must align legal mandates with realistic infrastructure, redistribute resources to disadvantaged communities, and promote awareness of neurodiversity across schools, workplaces, and society [18]. Sustainable inclusion depends not on isolated programs but on interconnected systems that reinforce one another [22].

Accordingly, legislation should be accompanied by enforceable mechanisms that lower adoption thresholds in weakly resourced contexts and normalize sensory-sensitive design as a standard of service delivery. These findings suggest that inclusion should not be understood as a single policy goal but as a multilayered social process shaped by legislation, institutional frameworks, resources, and cultural norms [21]. Achieving sustainable inclusion requires alignment between classroom-level adaptations, institutional and policy structures at the meso level, and legislative and rights-based guarantees at the macro level.

In education, this entails embedding coaching and key practices into regular timetables and evaluation frameworks. In employment, this calls for adaptation checklists written in clear language and tiered versions that small and medium-sized enterprises can adopt flexibly. In community settings, this requires institutionalizing quiet hours, visual cues, and staff training as routine procedures rather than limiting them to pilot projects. These directions closely reflect the policy levers repeatedly emphasized in reviews of education, employment, and community inclusion. Future research must also evolve. Without such coordination, inclusion often remains symbolic and fails to take root in practice [18]. Teaching strategies and classroom adjustments reach their full potential only when combined with institutional capacity building and supported by funding and rights protections at the broader level. When these three layers are aligned, participation rises significantly, whereas misalignment leads inclusive measures to drift away from their intended objectives.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the meaningful inclusion of individuals with ASD extends beyond policy intentions to a broader moral and societal imperative. The analysis identifies three systemic contradictions that undermine inclusion: the gap between legislation and practice, inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and pervasive social stigma. These findings indicate that rights-based frameworks alone are insufficient; without adequate structural support, institutional capacity, and cultural transformation, inclusion risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive.

Evidence from educational, occupational, and community settings confirms that inclusion is achievable when systems are well-resourced, stakeholders are trained, and neurodiversity is recognized as a strength rather than a deficit. However, these successes are uneven, largely concentrated in high-resource environments, leaving disadvantaged groups with limited access to educational, employment, and community opportunities. Structural inequities, limited professional development, insufficient workplace accommodations, and the scarcity of sensory-friendly community spaces continue to restrict meaningful participation for many individuals with ASD.

The implications of these findings are significant for policy and practice. Sustainable inclusion requires integrated, system-level initiatives that combine accountable policy implementation, equity-based funding, professional training, and programs that actively reduce stigma while amplifying autistic voices. Legislative measures must be paired with enforceable standards and culturally sensitive strategies to ensure that inclusion is not merely aspirational but operational across diverse contexts.

Future research should expand to include varied cultural and economic settings, emphasizing scalable and context-specific approaches that can adapt to local constraints. Longitudinal and participatory studies are particularly important for understanding the long-term impact of early interventions and for incorporating the lived experiences of autistic individuals into policy design. Addressing persistent biases, structural weaknesses, and societal misconceptions will be essential to closing the gap between idealistic inclusion and practical realities. Ultimately, meaningful inclusion is achieved not through isolated programs but through coordinated, systematic efforts that promote dignity, equity, and participation in all spheres of life. Only through such comprehensive approaches can individuals with ASD be afforded equal opportunities to thrive academically, professionally, and socially.

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