



Inclusive Education for Learners with Disabilities in the MENA Region: A Policy Analysis of Persistent Challenges and Emerging Practices

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ABSTRACT

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the right of learners with disabilities to an inclusive education is widely affirmed in law and national vision yet unevenly realised in practice. This policy analysis examines the gap between these ideals and the classroom realities that persist across the region, and it asks what emerging practices are beginning to close it. Drawing on peer-reviewed regional scholarship, we organise the evidence around a multilevel framework spanning policy, school, classroom, and family-community levels. We identify five recurring challenges: a durable policy-implementation gap in which progressive laws outrun the systems needed to enact them; a shortage of adequately prepared teachers and the ambivalent attitudes that shortage sustains; deficits in accessible infrastructure, resources, and assistive technology; cultural attitudes and stigma that shape family and community responses to disability; and weak data and fragmented, country-by-country progress that make regional learning difficult. Against these, we document a set of emerging practices with a growing evidence base: structured teacher professional development, the tailored use of assistive and technology-enhanced learning, deliberate family and community engagement, and the articulation of national inclusive-education frameworks, of which the United Arab Emirates model built around the concept of People of Determination is the most developed. We argue that the region's central task is not to invent new ideals but to build the implementation capacity, teacher pipeline, and data infrastructure through which existing commitments can be met, and we offer a policy framework and recommendations to that end. The analysis is limited by the uneven coverage of the underlying literature, which is concentrated in the Gulf states and thin for parts of North Africa.



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1. Introduction

The idea that children with disabilities belong in the same schools and, wherever possible, the same classrooms as their peers has moved, over three decades, from the margins of educational thought to the centre of international commitment. The Salamanca Statement gave the principle its most influential early expression, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities later made inclusive education a binding obligation, requiring states under Article 24 to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). Almost every country in the Middle East and North Africa has ratified the Convention and embedded the language of inclusion in its education policy. The gap that concerns this paper is the one that opens between that near-universal endorsement and what actually happens in schools.

The scale of the task is considerable. Tens of millions of persons with disabilities live in the MENA region, and children among them have historically been served, when served at all, in segregated special schools or not enrolled in formal education at all. The picture is not static: disability is more openly discussed than it once was, ministries have adopted inclusion policies, and a growing regional research literature now documents both progress and its limits. But the movement toward inclusion has been, in one careful assessment, "slow and fractured," advancing at different speeds across the region and often faster in policy than in practice (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). A comparative analysis of the Arab Gulf states captured the same tension as a distance between ideals, which are firmly in place, and realities, which are still developing (Al-Hendawi, Keller, & Khochen-Bagshaw, 2022).

This paper offers a policy analysis of that distance. Our questions are three. What are the persistent challenges that keep inclusive education from being realised for learners with disabilities across MENA? What emerging practices are beginning to address them, and what does the evidence say about their promise? And what would a policy framework adequate to the region's own commitments require? We approach these questions through a multilevel lens, because the barriers to

inclusion, and the levers that can shift them, are located at several levels at once, from national policy to the individual classroom and the family home. Throughout, we give particular attention to the United Arab Emirates, whose framing of learners with disabilities as People of Determination represents one of the region's most deliberate attempts to translate the ideal of inclusion into a national system (Alhumaidan & Habbal, 2025).

2. Analytical Approach

This is a conceptual policy analysis rather than a systematic review or an empirical study. Our purpose is to organise and interpret an existing body of regional evidence in a way that is useful to policymakers and practitioners, and to derive from it a framework and a set of recommendations. We drew on peer-reviewed scholarship on inclusive and special education in the MENA and Arab Gulf region, identified through academic databases and citation searching, prioritising comparative analyses, regional reviews, and country studies that report on policy, teacher preparation, attitudes, technology, and family perspectives. Because the literature is itself uneven, weighted heavily toward the Gulf states and toward a few well-studied countries, we treat it as indicative of regional patterns rather than as a complete map, and we flag this unevenness as a limitation of the analysis.

To structure the interpretation we adopt a multilevel framework, shown in Figure 1, that locates the factors shaping inclusive education at four interacting levels: the policy and system level, the school and leadership level, the classroom and teacher level, and the family and community level. The same framework can be read in two directions. Read downward, each level transmits barriers to the one below it, so that a well-intentioned national policy can be blunted by unprepared schools, under-trained teachers, and unsupportive community attitudes. Read upward, each level offers enablers that can carry an inclusive intention through to the child. Organising challenges and practices by level, rather than by country, lets us see patterns that recur across national borders and that a country-by-country account would obscure.

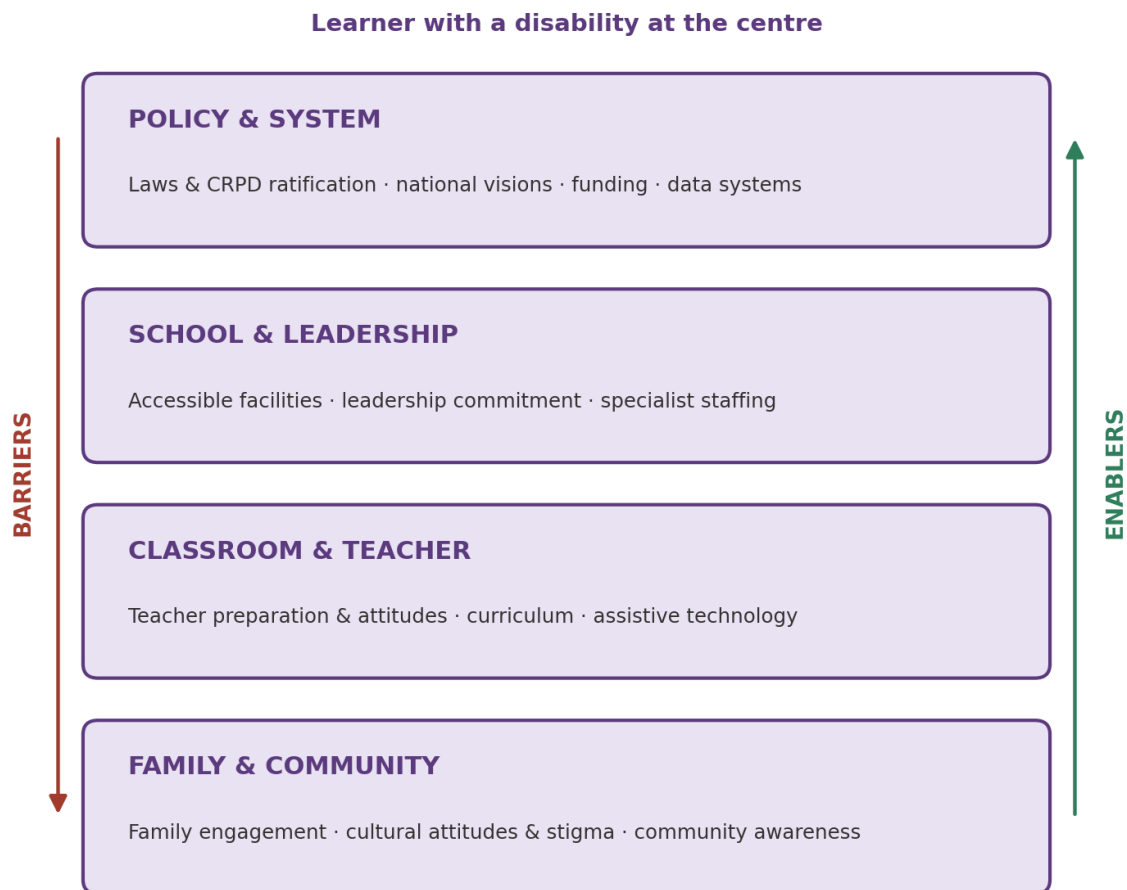


Figure 1. A multilevel framework of barriers and enablers to inclusive education, from national policy to the family and community.

3. The Policy Landscape: Strong Ideals

Any fair account of inclusive education in MENA must begin with the strength of its stated commitments, because the region's difficulty is emphatically not one of absent ambition. Across the Gulf Cooperation Council and beyond, constitutions, education laws, and national visions affirm the right of children with disabilities to education, and several states have enacted dedicated disability legislation that references inclusion explicitly. The comparative literature is consistent on this point: the countries' commitment to the right to education for individuals with disabilities is, as one analysis of the Arab Gulf states put it, solidly and firmly in place, even where the machinery to deliver on it is still being built (Al-Hendawi et al., 2022). National frameworks in the United Arab Emirates are among the most developed, mandating that students of determination remain in mainstream settings wherever possible and backing this with policy

documents and institutional guidance (Tecce DeCarlo et al., 2023).

The vocabulary a society chooses is itself part of its policy, and the UAE's adoption of the term People of Determination in place of language centred on deficit signals a deliberate reframing of disability toward capability and rights. This reframing has been accompanied by concrete strategy, including national inclusion policies in general education and a growing focus on inclusive practice in higher education (Oswal, Al-Kilani, Faisal, & Fteiha, 2025). The point of departure for the rest of this paper is therefore not a critique of the region's goals, which are broadly admirable and well aligned with international law, but an examination of why those goals so often stall on the way to the classroom.

It is important, before turning to the challenges, to resist treating MENA as a single undifferentiated case, because the region's internal diversity is one of the most consequential facts about it. The resource-rich Gulf states, with their comparatively well-funded ministries and expanding higher-education sectors, occupy a

different position from lower-income countries in North Africa and the Levant, where competing demands on strained budgets and, in some places, conflict and displacement, complicate any inclusion agenda. Even the reach of the research literature reflects this asymmetry, clustering around the Gulf and leaving parts of the region comparatively undocumented. Progress therefore begins from very different baselines, and a practice that succeeds in a well-resourced Emirati school may need substantial adaptation before it can travel to a rural school elsewhere in the region. We keep this heterogeneity in view throughout, and read the recurring challenges below as shared in kind while varying markedly in degree.

4. Persistent Challenges

Reading across the regional evidence, five challenges recur with enough regularity to be treated as structural rather than incidental. They correspond, roughly, to the levels of the framework in Figure 1, and they interact: each makes the others harder to solve.

4.1 The policy–implementation gap

The most pervasive challenge is the distance between policy and practice. Progressive laws and national strategies are frequently not matched by the budgets, accountability mechanisms, staffing, and monitoring needed to enact them, with the result that inclusion becomes an aspiration announced at the top of the system that thins out as it descends. Teachers' knowledge of their own country's inclusion policy can be strikingly low even where the policy is bold and explicit, and their confidence that their schools can meet the needs of students with disabilities is often limited (Tecce DeCarlo et al., 2023). The gap is not a sign of insincerity so much as of the difficulty of building, quickly, the implementation capacity that mature inclusive systems took decades to develop.

4.2 Teacher preparation and attitudes

If inclusion happens anywhere it happens in the classroom, and the classroom depends on the teacher, which makes the state of the teaching workforce decisive. Across the Gulf, special-education teacher preparation is still developing, with wide variation in the comprehensiveness and design of programmes and a limited supply of well-qualified specialists (Keller et al., 2016). The consequences are visible in teacher attitudes, which are frequently neutral rather than positive and are shaped less by demographic factors than by whether teachers have received training in inclusion. In Saudi Arabia, middle-school teachers' attitudes toward including students with disabilities were found to be

broadly neutral, with training the significant differentiator (Aldosari, 2022), while a study in Jeddah found teachers reporting that they lacked the qualifications, materials, and time that inclusion requires (Alsolami & Vaughan, 2023). Where teachers have specialist preparation and support, attitudes are more positive, as among special-education teachers in the UAE (Alkhatib, Efstratopoulou, & Elhoweris, 2023). The lesson is consistent: attitudes are not fixed traits to be lamented but products of preparation that policy can change.

4.3 Infrastructure, resources, and assistive technology

Inclusion also has material preconditions, and these are frequently unmet. Classrooms are often not designed for accessibility, specialist materials are scarce, and assistive technology, though increasingly available, is under-used relative to its potential. Reviews of assistive technology in Arabic-speaking special education find genuine promise, tempered by the recurring obstacles of insufficient teacher training and inconsistent support (Alanazi, 2023). Country studies echo this: teachers of students with intellectual disability in Saudi Arabia value assistive technology but describe uneven access and preparation (Sulaimani & Bagadood, 2022), and teachers in Amman report positive views of its benefits alongside clear barriers of training and resourcing (Rafi et al., 2025). The broader shift toward technology-enhanced learning in the region carries the same double edge, offering reach and equity in principle while risking a digital divide in practice, particularly outside the resource-rich states (Eltaiba et al., 2025).

4.4 Cultural attitudes, stigma, and the family

Schools sit within communities, and community attitudes toward disability shape what inclusion can achieve. Stigma, low expectations, and a lingering framing of disability as a matter for charity or concealment continue to affect the region, even as awareness grows. Yet the cultural picture is not simply an obstacle; it is also a resource. Studies from the Gulf show that religious and cultural values can be marshalled in favour of inclusion, with families and service providers in Qatar drawing on Islamic principles that place a high premium on the social inclusion of people with disabilities (Hassanein, Alqaryouti, & Kaki, 2024). Family perspectives are generally supportive of inclusion, though support is conditioned by the perceived severity of disability and by families' confidence in schools' capacity, and family and community engagement emerges repeatedly as a facilitator of social integration (Medabesh et al., 2024). A policy approach that treats families as partners, and that works with rather than against cultural and religious

meaning, has more to build on than a deficit reading would suggest (Bouchouar & Achraouaou, 2025).

4.5 Data, evidence, and fragmented progress

Underlying the other four challenges is a quieter one: the region's progress is fragmented, and the data needed to guide and compare it are often weak. Advance is uneven not only between countries but within them, and the research base is concentrated in a handful of states, leaving much of North Africa comparatively under-

studied. Without reliable data on enrolment, placement, and outcomes for learners with disabilities, systems cannot easily identify where they are failing or learn from where they are succeeding, and regional coordination is correspondingly difficult (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). Figure 2 situates the region on a conceptual maturity continuum, with much of MENA occupying the contested ground between segregation and genuine inclusion.

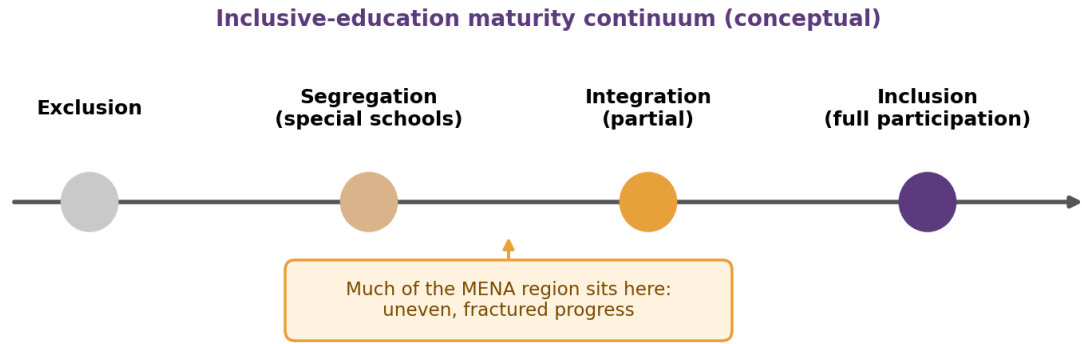


Figure 2. A conceptual inclusive-education maturity continuum, indicating the uneven position much of the region currently occupies.

Table 1. Persistent challenges to inclusive education in MENA, by framework level.

Challenge	How it manifests	Illustrative evidence
Policy–implementation gap	Progressive laws outrun funding, staffing, and monitoring; low policy awareness among teachers.	Tecce DeCarlo et al. (2023); Al-Hendawi et al. (2022)
Teacher preparation & attitudes	Limited specialist supply; neutral attitudes where training is absent.	Keller et al. (2016); Aldosari (2022); Alsolami & Vaughan (2023)
Infrastructure & assistive technology	Inaccessible classrooms; scarce materials; under-used, under-supported technology.	Alanazi (2023); Sulaimani & Bagadood (2022); Eltaiba et al. (2025)
Cultural attitudes & stigma	Deficit framings and low expectations; but also cultural/religious resources for inclusion.	Hassanein et al. (2024); Medabesh et al. (2024)
Data & fragmented progress	Uneven advance across and within countries; weak data; thin evidence for North Africa.	Khochen-Bagshaw (2020)

5. Emerging Practices and What Works

Against this catalogue of difficulty, the same literature documents practices that are beginning to work, and their common feature is that each targets a specific level of the framework rather than gesturing at inclusion in general. Table 2 maps the principal practices onto the challenges they address.

5.1 Teacher professional development

Because attitudes and capability track training so closely, structured professional development is the single most leveraged practice available. The evidence consistently shows that teachers who have been prepared for inclusion hold more positive attitudes and feel more able to teach diverse classrooms, and that training rather than

exhortation is what shifts the workforce (Aldosari, 2022; Alkhatib et al., 2023). The implication for policy is to treat teacher preparation not as a preliminary to inclusion but as its core infrastructure, investing in both pre-service programmes and sustained in-service support, and closing the wide variation in programme quality that comparative work has documented across the Gulf (Keller et al., 2016).

5.2 Assistive and technology-enhanced learning

Assistive technology, deployed with adequate training and support, repeatedly improves engagement and learning outcomes for students with disabilities in the region, and it widens the range of learners who can participate in a mainstream classroom (Sulaimani & Bagadood, 2022; Rafi et al., 2025). Regional initiatives that pair assistive tools with structured, multisensory instruction and family involvement illustrate how technology can serve as a transitional bridge into inclusive settings rather than a gadget bolted onto them, and how it can extend beyond the classroom toward independence and, eventually, employment (Shaikh, Sayed, Sahakyan, Muradyan, & Rubinger, 2025). The caution the evidence attaches is that technology amplifies whatever system it enters: without teacher preparation and equitable access it can widen rather than narrow gaps (Eltaiba et al., 2025).

5.3 Family and community engagement

Practices that treat families as partners and that engage the surrounding community consistently support inclusion and social integration. Where schools communicate with parents, involve them in planning, and draw on the cultural and religious values that many families hold, the home becomes an ally of the classroom rather than a separate sphere (Medabesh et al., 2024; Hassanein et al., 2024). This is also where the region's cultural distinctiveness becomes an asset: approaches that explicitly enlist religious and communal commitments to the dignity and inclusion of people with disabilities have a motivational reservoir to draw on that purely technocratic models lack (Bouchouar & Achraouaou, 2025).

5.4 National frameworks and the UAE model

At the system level, the most promising practice is the articulation of a coherent national framework that aligns law, funding, teacher standards, and school-level policy,

and that is monitored. The United Arab Emirates offers the region's most developed example, combining rights-based language, mainstreaming mandates, and a growing emphasis on inclusive practice and assistive technology in both schools and higher education (Oswal et al., 2025; Alhumaidan & Habbal, 2025). The UAE experience also illustrates the limits of policy alone: even a strong national framework delivers unevenly where teacher knowledge of it is low and school capacity varies, which returns the argument to implementation (Tecce DeCarlo et al., 2023). For autism specifically, reviewers of GCC provision have called for unified regional policy that formalises inclusion, sets teacher-accreditation standards, and mandates evidence-based practice, a prescription that generalises well beyond any single diagnosis (Alkhunini, 2025).

5.5 From school to higher education and transition

Inclusion does not end at the school gate, and one of the more encouraging regional developments is the extension of inclusive practice into higher education and the transition to adult life. A systematic review of strategies for students of determination in higher-education institutions found that instructional adaptation, staff training, technological solutions, and institutional support all improve inclusion, while confirming that the same barriers seen in schools, limited instructor preparation, variable institutional processes, and under-used assistive technology, reappear at the tertiary level (Oswal et al., 2025). The through-line matters because an inclusive school system that does not connect to inclusive universities and workplaces leaves its graduates stranded at the threshold of adult participation. Regional programmes that build digital and vocational skills alongside literacy, preparing learners not only to study but to navigate the systems of adult and working life, show how the school-to-adulthood pathway can be scaffolded deliberately rather than left to chance (Shaikh et al., 2025). Read together with the region's growing attention to employment for people with disabilities, this suggests that inclusive education is best understood as the first stage of a longer trajectory toward full participation, and that its dividends are realised only when the later stages are built to receive its graduates.

Table 2. Emerging practices mapped to the challenges they principally address.

Practice	Challenge addressed	What the evidence suggests
Structured teacher professional development	Preparation & attitudes	Training, not demographics, drives positive attitudes and capability.

Tailored assistive & technology-enhanced learning	Infrastructure & technology	Improves engagement and outcomes when paired with training and access.
Family & community engagement	Cultural attitudes & stigma	Enlists cultural and religious values; makes the home an ally of the school.
Coherent national inclusion frameworks	Policy–implementation gap	Aligns law, funding, standards, and monitoring; UAE is the leading model.
Regional data & policy coordination	Fragmented progress	Shared data and standards enable comparison and cross-country learning.

6. Toward a Regional Framework

The analysis points to a conclusion that is, in a sense, encouraging. The MENA region does not lack the right ideals, nor, increasingly, does it lack knowledge of what works; what it lacks, unevenly and to differing degrees across countries, is the implementation capacity to connect the two. The distance between a ratified convention and an included child is filled by trained teachers, accessible schools, supported technology, engaged families, and the data and accountability that let a system see itself. A useful way to hold this in view is to think of a simple policy–practice gap, the difference between a jurisdiction's declared commitments and its realised provision; the region's central project is to shrink that gap, and every practice reviewed above is, in effect, a way of doing so at one level of the framework.

It is worth stating this gap a little more precisely, because doing so clarifies where measurement should focus. If a jurisdiction's declared commitments are represented by an ideals score I and its realised provision by a practice score P , each expressed on a common normalized scale from 0 to 1, then the policy–practice gap is simply $G = I - P$. The MENA pattern is distinctive in that I is high across most of the region while P varies widely, so that G is driven far more by shortfalls in provision than by any deficiency of ambition. This is an unusual and, in one sense, hopeful diagnosis: it means that progress does not require winning the argument for inclusion, which is largely won, but building the capacity, teachers, infrastructure, data, and school-level implementation, that raises P toward the ideals already in place. Monitoring systems in the region would accordingly gain most by measuring provision and outcomes rather than restating commitments.

Three priorities follow. The first is to treat teacher preparation as the core of inclusion policy rather than its afterthought, expanding and standardising specialist training and embedding inclusion in the preparation of all teachers, since the evidence makes the teaching workforce the decisive variable (Keller et al., 2016;

Aldosari, 2022). The second is to invest in implementation and data infrastructure, so that bold national frameworks are matched by the budgets, monitoring, and information systems that let them reach schools and be evaluated (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020; Al-Hendawi et al., 2022). The third is to build deliberately on the region's own cultural and institutional strengths, including the rights-based reframing embodied in the UAE's People of Determination and the reservoir of religious and communal commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities, rather than importing models that ignore them (Hassanein et al., 2024; Alhumaidan & Habbal, 2025). Regional coordination, finally, would let states learn from one another's experiments instead of repeating one another's mistakes, an argument that recurs across the literature and applies with particular force given the region's shared language and culture (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020; Alkhunini, 2025).

These priorities are mutually reinforcing, and sequencing matters less than coherence. A ministry that trains teachers but does not resource their classrooms, or that publishes a national framework but does not measure its effects, will see the policy–practice gap persist in a new form. The more promising path is to advance the four levels of the framework together, using national policy to set standards and secure funding, school leadership to translate them into accessible environments and staffing, teacher preparation to equip the classroom, and family and community engagement to sustain the whole from below. The UAE's experience suggests that visible, high-level political commitment, expressed in the country's case through the language of People of Determination and through national strategy, is a powerful accelerant, because it licenses the budgets and the accountability that lower levels require. Other states in the region, working from different baselines, will find their own versions of that commitment, but the underlying architecture, aligned levels rather than isolated initiatives, is likely to be common to all successful cases.

Table 3. Priority recommendations for advancing inclusive education in MENA, by framework level and principal actor.

Level	Principal actor	Priority recommendation
Policy & system	Ministries of education; national leadership	Fund and monitor national inclusion frameworks; build enrolment and outcome data systems; set teacher-accreditation standards.
School & leadership	School leaders; local authorities	Ensure accessible facilities and specialist staffing; embed school-level inclusion plans and leadership accountability.
Classroom & teacher	Universities; teacher educators	Expand and standardise special-education preparation; embed inclusion in all pre- and in-service training; resource assistive technology with support.
Family & community	Schools; community & religious institutions	Engage families as partners; enlist cultural and religious commitments to inclusion; run community-awareness initiatives.
Regional	Inter-governmental bodies	Share data, standards, and evidence; coordinate research to cover under-studied countries and support cross-country learning.

7. Limitations

This analysis is subject to important limitations. It is interpretive rather than systematic, and it rests on a regional literature that is unevenly distributed, concentrated in the Gulf states and in a few well-studied countries while remaining thin for much of North Africa, so that our regional claims are better evidenced for some parts of MENA than for others. Much of the underlying evidence is cross-sectional and attitudinal, which describes the terrain well but speaks less directly to what changes outcomes over time. Definitions of inclusion, disability, and even the boundaries of the region vary across the sources, complicating synthesis. And because the field is developing quickly, some of the practices we describe as emerging rest on early rather than mature evidence. These constraints temper the confidence of our conclusions without, we think, unsettling their direction.

8. Conclusion

Inclusive education in the MENA region is a story of strong commitments meeting hard implementation. The right of learners with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers is affirmed almost everywhere in the region's law and rhetoric, and a growing body of practice shows how that right can be honoured: through teachers prepared and supported to teach diverse classrooms,

through assistive and digital tools used well, through families engaged as partners, and through national frameworks that align the system behind a common purpose. The obstacles that remain, the policy-implementation gap, the shortage of prepared teachers, the deficits in infrastructure and technology, the weight of stigma, and the fragmentation of progress and data, are real but they are addressable, and none of them is a reason to doubt the goal. The region's task in the coming years is less to decide whether to include learners with disabilities than to build, deliberately and at scale, the capacity to do so, drawing on its own cultural strengths and on the models, the United Arab Emirates prominent among them, that show what a determined national commitment can achieve.

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