

# REFRAMING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH LEARNING FACILITIES

## *A Review of Sri Lankan Education Policy and Practice*

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**Abstract.** Inclusive education has become a central priority within international development discourse and national education reform agendas in Sri Lanka. While policy frameworks consistently emphasise access, equity, and participation, the classroom environment is often treated as an assumed pedagogical backdrop rather than a critical condition for inclusive practice. This paper critically examines Sri Lankan inclusive education policy to reveal a conceptual gap in how learning facilities are articulated, arguing that inclusive classrooms must be explicitly framed as physical and material learning environments rather than implicitly assumed pedagogical spaces. The study adopts a literature-based comparative review of two key policy documents shaping inclusive education in Sri Lanka: the UNICEF Disability Inclusive Education Practices in Sri Lanka report (2021) and the National Education Policy Framework NEPF 2023 to 2033. These documents represent the country's principal diagnostic assessment of inclusive education practices and its most recent national policy framework, enabling a comparison between evidentiary analysis and policy intent. By reframing learning facilities as inclusive classroom environments understood as the physical, spatial, infrastructural, and material conditions that enable or constrain educational participation, the review demonstrates that although both documents acknowledge the importance of learning environments, neither explicitly frames or operationalises learning facilities as inclusive classroom environments. The paper identifies a disjunction between diagnostic evidence and policy ambition and positions this reframing as a foundation for future field-based research on inclusive classroom environments in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords.** *Inclusive Education; Learning Facilities; Classroom Environments; Education Policy; Sri Lanka*

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## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education is increasingly recognised as a fundamental component of equitable and high-quality education systems at both global and national levels (Ainscow, 2020; Pradhan & Naik, 2024; Soriano & Watkins, n.d.). International conventions and development frameworks emphasise that inclusion extends beyond access to schooling to encompass meaningful participation within learning environments that accommodate diverse learner needs (Jardinez & Natividad, n.d.; UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b). As a result, inclusive education is now understood not merely as a pedagogical or curricular concern, but as a systemic condition shaped by policy frameworks, institutional structures, and the physical and material realities of classrooms.

However, despite this growing emphasis, it remains unclear how the classroom learning environment is conceptualised within inclusive education policy discourse in Sri Lanka. While learning environments are referenced in policy texts, the extent to which they are articulated as active conditions shaping access, participation, and engagement for diverse learners warrants closer examination (UNICEF, 2021; NEPF, 2023; Pradhan & Naik, 2024; Ekanayake et al., n.d.; Ketheeswaran & Nawastheen, 2024).

This paper addresses this gap by examining how inclusive education is articulated within Sri Lankan policy, with a specific focus on the framing of learning facilities. Rather than evaluating classroom implementation or teaching practices, the study undertakes a policy-level inquiry into how inclusive education and its enabling conditions are conceptualised. In this context, learning facilities are reframed as inclusive classroom environments, understood as the physical, spatial, infrastructural, and material conditions that enable or constrain educational participation.

By analysing how learning facilities are positioned within key national policy documents, the paper argues that inclusive education cannot be fully understood or realised without explicit attention to the environments in which learning takes place. In doing so, it contributes to Sri Lankan inclusive education policy discourse by foregrounding learning facilities as a foundational, yet under theorised, dimension of inclusive classrooms, and by identifying implications for future policy interpretation and research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT**

Within facilities management and education infrastructure discourse, facilities are commonly discussed in relation to operational efficiency, maintenance, and administrative management (Astuti et al., 2023). These perspectives prioritise system level performance and asset management, offering important insights into infrastructure planning, but they often engage less directly with how educational spaces are experienced by learners and teachers in everyday classroom practice.

Inclusive education literature, by contrast, conceptualises inclusion as emerging from the interaction between learners and their environments rather than from individual learner characteristics alone (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). From this perspective, the classroom is understood as a lived educational space, where physical, spatial, and material conditions influence participation, engagement, and belonging (Daniels et al., 2018; Mahat et al., 2018). Learning environments are therefore recognised as relevant to inclusive practice, alongside curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Within this body of literature, learning facilities may be understood as encompassing physical, spatial, infrastructural, and material conditions such as classroom layout, accessibility, adaptability of furniture and learning materials, sensory conditions including lighting and acoustics, availability of support spaces, and overall infrastructural provision (Mahat et al., 2018; Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines, n.d.). These elements are frequently discussed as factors that influence how learners engage with educational activities and resources, and how inclusive principles of equity and participation are supported in practice (Booth & Ainscow, 2016).

In education policy literature, references to learning environments, infrastructure, and resources commonly appear as part of broader discussions on inclusion, quality, and equity. Policy documents often acknowledge the importance of appropriate environments in enabling inclusive education, though the manner and depth of this articulation vary across contexts. This variability makes policy texts a valuable site for examining how inclusive

education is conceptualised at a systemic level and how enabling conditions are positioned within national reform agendas.

Against this backdrop, policy literature provides an important entry point for examining how inclusive education is framed within specific national contexts. The following section, therefore, focuses on the significance of Sri Lankan inclusive education policy literature, outlining why key national documents were selected for analysis and how they inform an inquiry into the conceptualisation of learning facilities within inclusive education discourse.

## 2.2. SIGNIFICANCE OF POLICY LITERATURE ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

Policy literature plays a central role in shaping how inclusive education is conceptualised, prioritised, and operationalised within national education systems (Mosala & Sefotho, 2026; *The Social and Economic Rationale of Inclusive Education*, 2022). Policy documents not only articulate normative commitments to equity and inclusion, but also establish the conditions, responsibilities, and directions through which inclusive education is expected to be realised in practice (Woyessa, 2017). As such, policy texts constitute a critical site for examining how inclusion is framed at a systemic level, including how enabling conditions such as learning environments, infrastructure, and resources are positioned within national education agendas.

In Sri Lanka, inclusive education policy reflects the combined influence of international development frameworks and national education reform processes. International organisations, particularly UNICEF and UNESCO, have played a significant role in shaping inclusive education discourse through diagnostic assessments, capacity building initiatives, and alignment with global conventions and development goals (UNICEF, 2021). At the same time, national policy instruments articulate longer term visions for education reform that integrate inclusion within broader priorities of equity, quality, and national development (NEPF, 2023–2033) (National Education Policy Framework [NEPF], 2023). This has resulted in a layered policy landscape in which empirical assessments of practice coexist with aspirational policy frameworks.

Against this backdrop, this review focuses on two key policy publications: *Disability Inclusive Education Practices in Sri Lanka* (UNICEF, 2021) and the *National Education Policy Framework 2023–2033* (National Education Policy Framework [NEPF], 2023). These documents were selected because they represent distinct but complementary forms of policy literature. The UNICEF report provides an empirically grounded assessment of inclusive education practices informed by field observations, stakeholder engagement, and system level analysis, while the NEPF articulates a forward-looking national vision that guides long term education reform. Examining these documents together enables an inquiry into how inclusive education is framed across policy contexts that differ in purpose, scale, and orientation.

Analysing these texts in dialogue provides a basis for exploring how learning environments and classroom conditions are positioned within inclusive education policy, without conflating diagnostic evidence with policy aspiration. This approach allows for a

comparative examination of how inclusion is described, prioritised, and contextualised across policy types, thereby establishing a foundation for the methodological focus of this study.

### *2.2.1 UNICEF: Inclusion as Environment Dependent Practice*

The Disability Inclusive Education Practices in Sri Lanka report (UNICEF, 2021) conceptualises inclusive education as a practice shaped by conditions within schools and classrooms. Inclusion is discussed not only in relation to enrolment or policy commitment, but as an experience mediated by physical accessibility, classroom organisation, infrastructural provision, and the availability of learning resources. Drawing on field-based evidence, the report identifies factors such as inaccessible buildings, overcrowded classrooms, limited assistive resources, and inadequate infrastructural support as conditions that affect participation for children with disabilities and other marginalised learners (UNICEF, 2021).

Within this framing, classrooms emerge as significant sites where inclusion is either enabled or constrained. Spatial arrangements, circulation space, seating configurations, sensory conditions, and access to support facilities are repeatedly referenced as relevant to inclusive practice. Although the term learning facilities is not explicitly theorised, the report consistently positions inclusion as shaped by the interaction between learners and the physical and material conditions of schooling, rather than by individual characteristics alone. As such, the UNICEF report provides a practice-oriented perspective that foregrounds the role of environments in inclusive education.

### *2.2.2 NEPF: Inclusion as a Policy Objective*

In contrast, the National Education Policy Framework 2023–2033 conceptualises inclusive education primarily as a normative policy objective aligned with national development priorities and international commitments. Inclusion is articulated through principles of equity, access, and social justice, framing it as a guiding goal for system wide reform across all levels of education (National Education Policy Framework [NEPF], 2023).

Within the NEPF, references to infrastructure, resources, and learning environments appear in relation to institutional development, system strengthening, and national investment. Infrastructure is discussed as part of broader strategies for modernisation and capacity building, rather than through detailed engagement with classroom level spatial and material conditions. As a result, classrooms are implied as sites of inclusion but are not explicitly conceptualised as learning facilities that shape everyday participation. This reflects the policy's aspirational orientation and its emphasis on strategic direction rather than operational specificity.

Together, these two documents offer a valuable basis for examining how inclusive education is articulated across different forms of policy literature. Their contrast enables an inquiry into how classroom environments and learning facilities are positioned within

diagnostic and aspirational policy texts, thereby informing the methodological approach adopted in this study.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND POLICY CORPUS**

This study adopts a qualitative desk-based policy analysis approach, drawing on elements of critical policy review to examine how inclusive education conceptualises the classroom environment within Sri Lankan education policy. The research is non-empirical and interpretive in nature, focusing on the analysis of authoritative policy documents rather than primary data generated through observation, interviews, or surveys.

A comparative review design is employed, examining a defined policy corpus comprising two primary documents selected through purposive sampling based on their authority, relevance to inclusive education, and influence within Sri Lanka's national education policy landscape. The primary analytical texts are:

- Disability-Inclusive Education Practices in Sri Lanka (UNICEF, 2021)
- National Education Policy Framework 2023–2033 (National Education Policy Framework [NEPF], 2023)

These documents were selected because they represent distinct yet complementary forms of policy literature. The UNICEF report provides an internationally informed, practice-oriented assessment of inclusive education, while the NEPF articulates a national policy vision guiding long-term education reform. It represents the most recent national policy framework guiding future reform. Analysing these texts in dialogue enables an examination of how inclusive education and its enabling conditions, particularly classroom environments and learning facilities, are articulated across policy contexts that differ in purpose, scope, and orientation.

Additional international and national policy texts, including UNESCO conventions and disability-related national policies, were consulted to provide contextual grounding but were not treated as primary analytical materials. Other documents were not included as they either duplicate similar policy positions or lack the same level of national scope and influence.

The study is best understood as a desk study, as it relies on the systematic analysis of existing policy documents rather than secondary academic literature or primary empirical data. This approach enables a focused examination of how policy texts construct and communicate concepts related to inclusive education and learning environments.

#### **3.2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND PROCEDURE**

The analytical themes were derived through a combination of conceptual grounding in inclusive education literature and preliminary reading of the selected policy documents. They reflect key dimensions through which classroom environments are discussed in

relation to inclusion, particularly physical, spatial, infrastructural, and material conditions that influence participation. Document analysis focused on identifying both explicit and implicit references to:

- classroom environments and learning spaces,
- infrastructure and resource provision,
- physical accessibility and spatial configuration,
- learning materials and support spaces, and
- environmental readiness for inclusive practice.

A thematic content analysis approach was applied to systematically identify, code, and interpret patterns within the policy texts. The analysis involved iterative reading of the documents, coding of relevant excerpts, and grouping of codes into broader analytical themes. This process enabled both explicit and implicit references to classroom environments and learning facilities to be identified and compared across the selected policy texts. Each policy document was read independently to examine how inclusive education and its enabling conditions were articulated. The analyses were then compared to examine similarities and differences in how classroom environments and learning facilities were positioned across policy contexts.

The analytical framework guided the study by structuring how data were extracted and interpreted from the policy texts. It enabled the identification of gaps between how inclusive education is conceptually framed and how classroom environments are operationally addressed, ultimately informing the comparative findings presented in this study.

### 3.3. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study is limited to policy-level analysis and does not include empirical fieldwork, interviews, or classroom observation. Accordingly, the analysis reflects how inclusive classroom environments are articulated within policy discourse rather than how they are enacted in practice. This delimitation allows for focused examination of policy framing and provides a foundation for future empirical investigation.

### 3.4. METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

By integrating critical policy review with a facilities-oriented analytical lens, this methodology offers a structured approach to examining how inclusive education environments are conceptualised within policy texts. The approach is adaptable to other national contexts and supports future research that seeks to translate policy language into observable classroom conditions through field-based study.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the comparative policy analysis, examining how inclusive education is conceptualised in relation to classroom environments and learning facilities within the selected policy documents. The analysis focuses on explicit and implicit references to physical, spatial, infrastructural, and material conditions that shape inclusive educational participation.

#### 4.1 FRAMING OF CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY: UNICEF 2021 AND NEPF 2023–2033

The Disability-Inclusive Education Practices in Sri Lanka report (UNICEF, 2021) conceptualises inclusive education as a practice closely shaped by classroom environments, infrastructure, and material conditions. Inclusion is presented not merely as an issue of enrolment or access, but as a process that unfolds within everyday learning spaces. Throughout the report, physical accessibility, classroom layout, availability of assistive devices, and adequacy of learning materials are identified as factors influencing learners' participation and engagement.

In contrast, the National Education Policy Framework 2023–2033 frames inclusive education primarily as a national policy objective embedded within broader education reform agendas. Inclusion is articulated through commitments to equity, access, quality, and systemic transformation, with emphasis on governance reform, curriculum development, teacher education, and system-wide planning.

Although the report does not explicitly employ the term learning facilities, it implicitly treats classrooms and school infrastructure as active components of inclusive education. Barriers to inclusion are frequently associated with environmental constraints such as inaccessible buildings, overcrowded classrooms, limited adaptive resources, and inadequate support spaces. Enabling conditions, by contrast, are linked to flexible classroom arrangements, accessible infrastructure, and appropriate material supports. Inclusion is thus framed as contingent upon the interaction between learners and their physical and material environments.

While references to infrastructure, resources, and learning environments appear across the NEPF, they are largely articulated at a strategic and institutional level. Classroom environments are implied as part of the education system but are not explicitly examined as active sites where inclusion is enacted in everyday practice. Issues such as spatial configuration, sensory conditions, adaptability of learning materials, and classroom-level environmental readiness receive limited explicit attention, reflecting the framework's aspirational orientation and focus on long-term reform rather than operational specificity.

#### 4.2. COMPARATIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING FACILITIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY

When analysed together, the two documents reveal contrasting but complementary framings of inclusive education in relation to classroom environments. The UNICEF (2021) report foregrounds environmental enablers and constraints as observable factors shaping inclusion in practice, whereas the NEPF (2023–2033) situates learning environments within a broader policy architecture without unpacking their classroom-level implications.

Across both documents, learning environments are recognised as relevant to inclusive education; however, neither explicitly conceptualises classroom environments as learning facilities, nor do they articulate classrooms as designed spaces that actively shape participation, engagement, and belonging. Environmental conditions remain embedded

within broader discussions of access, equity, and quality, rather than being developed as a distinct conceptual dimension of inclusive education.

This comparison reveals a distinction between diagnostic attention to environmental conditions and aspirational policy framing. The UNICEF report implicitly positions classrooms as sites where inclusion is enabled or constrained through physical and material conditions, while the NEPF advances a national vision for inclusive education with limited articulation of how such conditions operate at the classroom level. Viewed through a facilities-oriented lens, this distinction highlights an important area for further policy interpretation and research, particularly in relation to translating inclusive education commitments into classroom environments.

### 4.3. BULLET LISTS

Bullet texts can be a part of the paper. They can either be separated from the text preceding or following. An example is shown below.

*Table 1, Summary of Final Findings from Comparative Policy Analysis*

<b>Analytical Dimension</b>	<b>UNICEF (2021): Practice-Oriented Policy</b>	<b>NEPF (2023–2033): Aspirational Policy</b>
<b>Conceptualisation of Inclusion</b>	Inclusion framed as a lived practice shaped by everyday school and classroom conditions (pp. 30–45)	Inclusion is framed as a normative policy goal aligned with national reform priorities (pp. 15–25)
<b>Role of Classroom Environment</b>	Implicitly positioned as an active determinant of inclusion and participation (pp. 34–42)	Treated as a supporting condition within system-level reform (pp. 60–75)
<b>Attention to Physical and Spatial Conditions</b>	Frequent references to accessibility, layout, overcrowding, and spatial constraints (pp. 36–44)	Limited explicit reference to classroom-level spatial conditions (pp. 65–80)
<b>Material and Resource Considerations</b>	Emphasis on assistive devices, learning materials, and support spaces (pp. 38–46)	Resources discussed at institutional and system level (pp. 70–85)
<b>Operational vs Strategic Orientation</b>	Diagnostic and practice-oriented, grounded in field realities (pp. 28–50)	Strategic and aspirational, focused on long-term reform (pp. 28–50)
<b>Conceptualisation of Learning Facilities</b>	Implicit but not theorised	Implied but not articulated
<b>Treatment of Classroom as Designed Space</b>	Classrooms emerge as sites where inclusion is enacted or constrained (pp. 34–44)	Classrooms assumed rather than explicitly conceptualised

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined how inclusive education is conceptualised in relation to classroom environments and learning facilities within Sri Lankan education policy, through a comparative analysis of two nationally influential policy documents. By placing a practice-oriented diagnostic assessment (UNICEF, 2021) in dialogue with an aspirational national policy framework (National Education Policy Framework [NEPF], 2023), the study explored how learning environments are positioned across policy contexts that differ in purpose, scope, and orientation.

The findings indicate that while both documents recognise the relevance of learning environments to inclusive education, they frame this relationship in distinct ways. The UNICEF report implicitly positions classroom environments as active sites where inclusion is enabled or constrained through physical accessibility, spatial organisation, infrastructural provision, and material resources. In contrast, the NEPF articulates inclusive education primarily as a system-level objective, with references to infrastructure and learning environments situated within broader strategies for institutional development and long-term reform. As a result, classroom environments are acknowledged but not explicitly conceptualised as learning facilities that shape everyday participation and engagement.

Viewed together, these policy framings reveal a distinction between diagnostic attention to environmental conditions and aspirational policy articulation. This distinction underscores the value of a facilities-oriented analytical lens for examining inclusive education policy, as it brings into focus the physical, spatial, infrastructural, and material dimensions through which inclusion is experienced in practice. While these dimensions are present within policy discourse, they remain largely implicit and dispersed rather than explicitly framed as integral components of inclusive classrooms.

By making this dimension visible through comparative policy analysis, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusive education in Sri Lanka by highlighting the need for clearer articulation of learning facilities within policy discourse. This reframing does not propose new policy prescriptions but establishes a conceptual foundation for future research. In particular, it points to the importance of field-based studies that examine how inclusive education commitments are translated into classroom environments, and how learning facilities can be systematically understood as enabling conditions for inclusive educational participation.

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