

Initial Teacher Education and Inclusion: Progress, Setbacks, and Challenges 30 Years after the Salamanca Statement

education policy analysis
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,
open access, multilingual journal



epaa | aape

Arizona State University

Volume 34 Number 17

February 24, 2026

ISSN 1068-2341

From Salamanca to the Present: Configurations and Tensions in Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion¹

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Citation: Campos-Martínez, J., Herrera-Seda, C., Millan, C., & Fernández, M. B. (2026). From Salamanca to the present: Configurations and tensions in initial teacher education for inclusion. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 34(17). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.34.10169> This article is part of the Special Issue, *Initial Teacher Education and Inclusion: Progress, Setbacks, and Challenges 30 Years after the Salamanca Statement*, guest edited by Javier Campos-Martínez, Constanza Herrera-Seda, Cecilia Millán, and María Beatriz Fernández.

¹ Funding from ANID Support 2024 AFB240004 is gratefully acknowledged.

Abstract: This introductory article examines advances, setbacks, and challenges in the programs of initial teacher education for inclusion, 30 years after the Salamanca Declaration. Drawing on recent international reports, policy documents, and empirical research, the article provides an updated overview of challenges facing teacher education, including persistent inequalities and the limited diversification of the teaching workforce. It situates inclusive education as a contested field shaped by policy developments and uneven institutional responses across contexts. The article reviews key conceptual shifts in the understanding of inclusion, moving beyond disability-centered approaches toward broader perspectives, and analyzes how these shifts have reshaped expectations of the teaching profession. It also identifies ongoing limitations within initial teacher education, such as deficit-based approaches and curricular fragmentation. Finally, the article introduces and contextualizes the contributions that compose the special issue, outlining how each article addresses these challenges from different contexts and analytical approaches.

Keywords: initial teacher education; inclusive education; educational policy; social justice

De Salamanca al presente: Configuraciones y tensiones de la formación inicial docente para la inclusión

Resumen: Este artículo introductorio examina los progresos, retrocesos y desafíos actuales de la formación inicial docente para la inclusión, a treinta años de la Declaración de Salamanca. A partir de informes internacionales recientes, documentos de política pública y estudios empíricos, el artículo ofrece una visión actualizada de los desafíos que enfrenta la formación docente, incluyendo las desigualdades persistentes y la escasa diversificación del profesorado. Sitúa la educación inclusiva como un campo en disputa, configurado por desarrollos normativos y respuestas institucionales desiguales en distintos contextos. El texto revisa desplazamientos conceptuales en la comprensión de la inclusión, desde enfoques centrados en la discapacidad hacia perspectivas más amplias, y analiza cómo estos cambios han redefinido las expectativas sobre la profesión docente. Asimismo, identifica limitaciones que persisten en la formación inicial docente, como los enfoques deficitarios y la fragmentación curricular. Finalmente, el artículo presenta y contextualiza los trabajos que componen el número especial, mostrando cómo cada uno aborda estos desafíos desde distintos contextos y enfoques analíticos.

Palabras-clave: formación inicial del profesorado; educación inclusiva; política educativa; justicia social

De Salamanca ao presente: Configurações e tensões da formação inicial de professores para a inclusão

Resumo: Este artigo introdutório examina os avanços, os retrocessos e os desafios atuais da formação inicial de professores para a inclusão, trinta anos após a Declaração de Salamanca. Com base em relatórios internacionais recentes, documentos de políticas públicas e estudos empíricos, o artigo oferece uma visão atualizada dos desafios enfrentados pela formação docente, incluindo desigualdades persistentes e a baixa diversidade do corpo docente. Situa a educação inclusiva como um campo em disputa, moldado por desenvolvimentos normativos e por respostas institucionais desiguais em diferentes contextos. O texto revisa deslocamentos conceituais na compreensão da inclusão, superando abordagens centradas exclusivamente na deficiência em direção a perspectivas mais amplas, e analisa como essas mudanças redefiniram as expectativas em relação à profissão docente. Também identifica limitações que persistem na formação inicial de professores, como abordagens deficitárias e fragmentação curricular. Por fim, o artigo apresenta e contextualiza os trabalhos que compõem o número especial, mostrando

como cada contribuição aborda esses desafios a partir de contextos e enfoques analíticos distintos.

Palavras-chave: formação inicial de professores; educação inclusiva; política educacional; justiça social

From Salamanca to the Present: Configurations and Tensions in Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion²

Inclusion and the Right to Education in a Contentious Landscape

Three decades after the Salamanca Declaration (1994), inclusion in education faces an adverse scenario that was almost unimaginable years ago. The conservative shift in global politics, which is advancing through democratic elections, is jeopardizing the progress made in education in terms of equity and social justice since the 1990s. The Salamanca Declaration (1994) marked the beginning of the conceptual shift from integration to inclusion, defining it as an integral part of the right to education and calling for the transformation of national education systems to respond to student diversity, thereby seeking to end segregation, particularly that associated with disability. Three decades after this milestone, countries in different regions are experiencing setbacks that affect progress in social and educational inclusion. This conservative shift is expressed in institutional and symbolic measures that directly affect students, teachers, families, and the curriculum, thus creating barriers to the effective exercise of the right to education.

In countries such as the United States, this shift has been expressed through federal guidelines aimed at dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in public agencies and across the education system (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Higher education institutions have been forced to close units and cancel programs aimed at equity, directly affecting students, courses, departments, lines of research, and academic working conditions. In Argentina, the government announced a ban on the use of inclusive language and the imposition of restrictions on the “gender perspective” in public administration, a move situated within a broader cultural dispute over equality rights and policies (El País, 2024; Ubilluz, 2024).

Challenges to inclusion have also shifted strongly toward symbolic and curricular levels, particularly in relation to gender and sexual orientation. In countries such as Peru and El Salvador, the “gender approach” in education has been eliminated through direct intervention in the content and language of public-school textbooks, while so-called “inclusive language” has been banned in public schools (Cuenca, 2025; Ubilluz, 2024). In some regions of Spain, proposals such as the so-called “parental pin” allow parents and caregivers to veto their children’s participation in school activities related to gender identity, affective-sexual education, or diversity (Gómez, 2022). In Brazil, the literature has documented how conservative coalitions and projects such as Escola sem Partido have worked to remove the concepts of “gender” and “sexual orientation” from educational plans and to inhibit school debates on inequalities, while establishing frameworks for surveillance and reporting that undermine teacher autonomy (Lima et al., 2025; Rossi & Pátaro, 2020; Santos et al., 2021). The retreat from inclusion does not take a single, canonical form in all countries and contexts, but it is instead manifested across regulatory, institutional, and symbolic-curricular frameworks, thereby reconfiguring what is considered teachable and speakable, and redefining the threshold of what is accepted and

² This is a professional translation provided by the authors and has not been peer reviewed.

possible in education. This has practical consequences for the lives of members of school communities, validating and empowering some, while denying the particularities, or even the existence, of others.

In contrast, international frameworks continue to uphold inclusion as an inseparable principle of democratic education and the right to education. The recommendations of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession (2024) and the positions of global teachers' unions affirm that inclusion requires institutional capacities, dignified working conditions, and safe and non-discriminatory educational environments, and they conceptualize equity as a condition for the possibility of equality (Education International, 2024). Inclusion and the right to education are associated with the idea that ensuring successful educational trajectories for all students requires education systems capable of recognizing and addressing differences related to gender, social background, racialization, disability, language, and immigration status, among other dimensions. Inclusion is seen as the means to achieve equality, and teaching is understood as a strategic profession for challenging and removing historical barriers to exclusion (Education International, 2024; UNESCO, 2025; United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession, 2024).

Diversity, Preparation, and Legitimacy: Tensions in Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion

Recent empirical evidence allows us to gauge the centrality of inclusion in teaching. Teachers' working conditions indicate increasing demands in this area. The results of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS, 2024) show that, compared to 2018, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of teachers working with refugee students, students whose first language is not the language of instruction, and students with special educational needs (SEN). On average, the proportion of teachers in schools with refugee students increased by more than 20 percentage points in OECD countries, while the presence of students with SEN and those with different linguistic competencies also increased steadily (OECD, 2025). These data show that diversity is not a marginal issue, but rather a structural condition of contemporary teaching. However, this increase in classroom complexity has not been accompanied by commensurate preparation in initial teacher education. TALIS 2024 indicates that only 44% of new teachers feel prepared to support their students' social and emotional development, and only 33% feel equipped to teach in multicultural or multilingual contexts (OECD, 2025). The coexistence of more diverse classrooms and the feeling of being ill-prepared to address them intensifies tensions in professional practice, reinforcing the perception of a mismatch between what teacher education institutions offer and what inclusive teaching requires.

This mismatch is also linked to a structural issue that is often overlooked: the persistent lack of diversity among teachers themselves and the prevalence of common-sense assumptions about who can be legitimate teachers (Madero, 2025; United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession, 2024). Inclusive teacher education, therefore, requires explicitly questioning who can enter, remain, and develop within the profession. International reports on teaching staff agree that the social and cultural composition of the teaching profession does not reflect the diversity of the student body or the communities it serves. Furthermore, it has been emphasized that attracting and retaining teachers from historically underrepresented groups is a central component of educational equity strategies (UNESCO, 2025; United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession, 2024). The homogeneity of the teaching workforce limits education systems' capacity to respond to increasingly diverse classrooms and reproduces structural barriers within the profession,

affecting the relevance of teaching and the effective guarantee of the right to education (UNESCO, 2025).

The development of inclusive education over the decades has gone hand in hand with discussions about the preparation required of teachers to take on a leading role in this process. There is a broad consensus that initial teacher education is a key stage for enabling teachers to adopt an inclusive approach in their teaching practice (Echeita, 2019). This has led to the gradual incorporation of inclusion into education policies and teacher education programs during the last few decades (UNESCO, 2020). Higher education institutions have addressed this challenge through various strategies, including university courses, practical training in schools, and cross-curricular approaches (Symeonidou, 2017). The incorporation of inclusive education into teacher education curricula has been accompanied by sustained growth in research on the subject (Khamzina et al., 2024). However, significant challenges remain in this area, to which this special issue seeks to contribute.

On the one hand, research on initial teacher education for inclusion has focused on certain regions of Europe and the United States, paying little attention to other contexts (Cretu & Morandau, 2020). This special issue invites readers to explore teacher education for inclusion in various regions, which are affected and challenged by different national and institutional orientations. The authors take us on a journey in which context is not merely a backdrop, but actively shapes the experiences of future teachers through its expression in social, cultural, political, and institutional conditions. Understanding the nuances of teacher education for inclusion in these diverse territories helps to overcome the decontextualized approaches so common in teacher education and brings us closer to a more relevant understanding, which is especially important for contexts located far from the centers of power where international guidelines and policies for teacher education have traditionally been established (Herrera-Seda & Walton, 2025).

On the other hand, research on teacher education for inclusion has focused mainly on analyzing the attitudes or dispositions of future teachers toward inclusion (Tristani & Bassett-Gunter, 2020). This approach has led to a simplification of what teaching involves in terms of inclusion and a lack of consideration of the conditions that affect teacher education (Pugash et al., 2020). In this regard, this special issue calls for moving beyond the cognitive and individual view of subjects to recognize the diverse spatial, cultural, experiential, material, and other conditions associated with experiences of training for inclusion. The authors allow us to broaden our understanding of this topic and to recognize the importance of diverse spaces, temporalities, and agents. This broader, more complex, and situated approach encourages us to move beyond lines of research that, for decades, have focused on verifying deficits, not only in students but also in teachers (Slee, 2011). Furthermore, it opens new horizons of imagination grounded in the specific conditions in which teacher education and practice take place in each territory.

The articles in this special issue share the assumption that, in these complex times, more than ever, teacher education must not be limited to defining itself “for” inclusion, but must itself “be” inclusive, promote critical thinking, and contribute to the common good. The articles agree that it is not enough to prepare teachers to work in diverse classrooms; it is also necessary to analyze how teacher education produces identities, spaces, and positions within the education system. Inclusion is not only an educational goal, but also a lived experience, one that is contested and, in some cases, subject to tension for those training to become teachers. This experience does not develop in a vacuum, but is shaped by international, national, and institutional policies that define what is meant by inclusion, who should be included, how

inclusion should be addressed in teacher education, and for what purposes it should be incorporated.

About the Contributions in this Issue

This special issue contributes to the debate on inclusion policies and teacher education from various empirical and theoretical perspectives, primarily located in Latin America, but in constant dialogue with international debates.

The work of Marta Infante and Martín Navarro-Ibáñez provides a particularly clear view of the tensions that arise in initial teacher education programs. These tensions emerge from the analysis of public policy documents, narratives, and expressive artifacts, but above all from the experiences of Ana and Paula, two future teachers who are themselves living with disabilities. The first article in this special issue demonstrates that teacher education, even when it rhetorically declares its commitment to inclusion, continues to be organized in many spaces around expectations aligned with productivism and performance, transferring to future teachers the responsibility of adjusting to formative devices designed for “normal” bodies and students.

For Ana and Paula, their training in inclusion is experienced as an ambivalent process in which, discursively, they find symbolic belonging and professional projection in educational spaces. However, in everyday practice, they encounter the demands of constant translation, adaptation, and individual negotiation in relation to ableist academic rhythms, evaluations, and cultures. Using a theoretical perspective anchored in critical disability studies, the study, far from understanding these tensions as individual failures, reveals them as structural effects of an education that prepares students to teach in inclusive contexts without transforming the institutional conditions that regulate the bodies permitted to legitimately inhabit the teaching profession. Although inclusive education emerged historically as a response to the exclusion of students with disabilities, initial teacher education continues to reproduce integrative or deficit-based frameworks that position disability as an exception, a problem to be managed, or a specialized field. Social and critical theories of disability demonstrate that these tensions cannot be explained by the individual attitudes of teachers in training, but rather by formative, evaluative, and organizational structures that produce ableism, delimit who can be recognized as legitimate teachers, and naturalize barriers within teacher education itself. In their article, it becomes clear that inclusion emerges as an effect of institutional relationships rather than as an attribute of individual subjects.

Recognizing the risk that inclusion may be reduced to well-intentioned rhetoric while remaining compatible with the structures that produce and reproduce exclusion, the article by Maria Mavrides Calderon and Isabel Mavrides-Calderon frames inclusion as a cross-cutting responsibility. Drawing on critical disability theories (disability justice), the authors examine inclusion not only as a normative principle, but also as formative content within general primary teacher education programs in the United States. Their point of departure is the intersection of ableism with other historical systems of social domination, understood as configurations that shape and prescribe which bodies, trajectories, and ways of learning are rendered legible and valued within teacher education. Within this framework, the authors’ positionality and personal experiences of exclusion function as both a central biographical antecedent and an analytical lens through which knowledge is produced. The article questions capitalist definitions of human value that privilege productivity, individualism, and self-sufficiency, and that silently permeate teacher education, drawing explicitly on a biography marked by disability within the family context, as well as experiences of racialization and classism.

Using discourse analysis techniques, their findings provide insight into the transition experienced by 78 future teachers in relation to the principles of disability justice within a

semester-long course on literacy methods. As theoretical frameworks are connected with concrete classroom experiences and sustained reflective practice, the authors show how a significant shift occurs from deficit-focused views of inclusion to a relational understanding based on interdependence, recognition, and what the authors conceptualize as political affection. In this transition, future teachers reconfigure their understanding of the teaching role, embracing inclusion as an institutional and professional obligation, rather than as a set of individual adjustments or a task limited to special education.

The article by Mauricio Vergara and Milena Vega Díaz provides insight into how inclusion is experienced and understood throughout the teacher education trajectory, beyond curricular discourse. The study addresses a rarely explored aspect: the spatial dimension of initial teacher education. From a humanistic and hermeneutic geography perspective, and using a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach based on Ricoeur's theory of text, the authors analyze the experiences of 16 preservice teachers in special education in Chile. The results show a complex formative cartography: the university appears simultaneously as a place of belonging, reflection, and politicization, and as a space fraught with tension due to its academic emphasis and distance from the reality of schools. In the practicum, special schools are experienced as places of recognition and professional collaboration, while regular schools are experienced as places of invisibility and deprofessionalization.

This article invites us to reflect on the role of professionalism in inclusive teaching practice, highlighting the importance of recognition and agency within educational trajectories shaped by segregation, by shuttling between university and school, and by disputes over the public meaning of teaching. It shifts the focus from inclusion understood as an individual competence or a curricular attribute toward a situated, relational, and material understanding, where the places that are inhabited condition the exercise of teaching work and the real possibilities of enacting inclusive practices.

On the other hand, the scenario described throughout this introduction cannot be interpreted solely as the effect of a recent conservative shift. As Waitoller et al. (2019) warn, much of the current fragility of inclusion can be explained by its progressive translation into depoliticized and functionally aligned versions within neoliberal frameworks of educational governance. In this process, inclusion was reduced to diversity management, individual adjustment, or technical compliance, losing its capacity to interrogate the structures that produce exclusion and inequality. These "cleansed" forms of inclusion, compatible with standardization, accountability, and political neutrality, ultimately weakened its transformative potential and left the field open to challenge.

In this context, Pablo Barrientos-Saavedra's work offers a particularly illuminating analysis of how inclusion is processed—and also neutralized—at the curricular level. Based on a qualitative case study of two teacher education programs in primary education in Chile, the article analyzes a cross-cutting approach to gender and LGBTIQ+ inclusion as a field of institutional dispute rather than merely as a matter of content. The author shows that, although the programs declare commitments to inclusion and rights, these are translated into differentiated curricular rationalities that can ultimately deactivate their political power.

For example, one of the programs studied by the author seeks to politicize teacher education through a focus on rights and social justice, while the other is organized around a diagnostic-solution framework that manages diversity as a variable that affects learning. In addition, semi-structured interviews with key actors, focus groups with students, and documentary analysis of graduation profiles and course syllabi allow us to observe how the curriculum operates as a boundary of what can be said. The analysis reveals that inclusion can be reduced to a curricular "topic," compatible with technocratic logics of university governance,

without substantially altering the mechanisms that reproduce hierarchies and normalizations in teacher education.

The article by Amaia Alberdi-Ruiz de Alegría, Monike Gezuraga Amundarain, and Ainara Imaz Agirre places the role of teachers within a context of commodification and the erosion of the meanings associated with education for all, inclusion, and social justice. Their starting point is strategic: if the aim is to prepare teachers in critical and emancipatory pedagogies, it is essential to understand what knowledge, positions, and meanings underpin those who educate future teachers. The authors develop a case study using a questionnaire and focus groups to examine the discursive production of seven university teacher educators regarding their understandings of inclusive education and social justice. The findings show an explicit political positioning in favor of social transformation, often emphasized more strongly than the notion of inclusion itself among the participants.

Another important distinction emerges: those with more experience and training tend to emphasize methodological and pedagogical strategies related to inclusion. In contrast, those with less training in transformative pedagogies focus more on attitudinal aspects. All seven teacher educators agree that social justice constitutes an ethical issue of commitment and responsibility. Furthermore, they concur on the need for a more slow, dialogical, and complex pedagogy, capable of resisting trends that reduce teachers to technical implementers of designs created by others. The article positions critical inclusion in teacher education as a structural project, not compensatory or individualized, but articulated with pedagogical knowledge, within a formative community and through collective agency, grounded in reflection and anchored in specific contexts. The article shows that this potential does not ignore institutional constraints (curricular, evaluative, or regulatory), but neither does it accept them as an insurmountable barrier. On the contrary, it demonstrates how collaborative work, action research, and sustained engagement with school communities open up new horizons for pedagogical action from the initial teacher education stage, positioning future teachers not only as implementers of programs but also as producers of curricula with public meaning and social commitment.

Along these lines, the article by María Gimena San Martín, together with Fabiana Sacchi, Melina Porto, and Dario Luis Banegas, offers a robust example of how initial teacher education can channel inclusion and social justice from the very heart of teaching practice. The article analyzes the English subject in secondary school as a space for pedagogical and political intervention, and distances it from approaches that conceive of the curriculum as a neutral or merely technical container. Their study is based on a collaborative longitudinal action research project (2022–2023) carried out in six public secondary schools in two cities in Argentina. Five future English teachers and broader school communities, including 178 adolescent students and 42 adults, participated in the study. The research was organized into three iterative cycles (planning, action, observation, and reflection) and integrated multiple instruments: an initial qualitative survey, the design of teaching materials and instructional sequences, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews at the end of each stage. The results show that inclusion is not achieved through discursive addition, but rather through the reorientation of curricular objectives. The design of materials, the selection of socially relevant topics, and openness to community experiences transform the English classroom into a space for participation, cultural recognition, and democratic deliberation. Teaching is conceived as a situated practice, capable of articulating local languages, knowledge, and local realities, and of questioning the reproduction of narrow or decontextualized cultural repertoires.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue advance a perspective that places greater demands on initial teacher education for inclusion, shifting from the declarative level to the material, curricular, and experiential conditions in which it is produced. Using different

analytical approaches, they show that inclusion cannot be understood solely as a normative horizon or a repertoire of pedagogical strategies, but rather as a situated practice that plays out in curriculum design, in specific formative trajectories, and in the effective possibility of belonging, teaching, and projecting oneself professionally. Diversity thus appears not as an exception, but as a structural condition of contemporary teaching work, and initial teacher education as a key—albeit tense—space for disputing its meaning.

The articles also invite readers to consider initial teacher education for inclusion beyond prescriptive solutions or instrumental approaches. The special issue proposes understanding it as a field shaped by conceptual disputes, structural conditions, and formative experiences that directly influence how inclusion materializes—or is diluted—in education systems. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a critical and situated dialogue on the progress, setbacks, and challenges that persist three decades after Salamanca, placing the spotlight on those who are studying to become teachers and the institutions responsible for supporting this process.

We also observe thematic gaps, particularly in relation to the role of digital technologies in initial teacher education for inclusion. In a context marked by the expansion of platforms, artificial intelligence, hybrid education, and digital surveillance, there is a striking absence of work that interrogates how these technologies reconfigure—or deepen—inequalities, forms of access, assessment practices, and models of teacher professionalism. This silence is especially significant given that technologies are increasingly presented as neutral or inevitable solutions, without systematic discussion of their implications for inclusion and social justice.

From a methodological perspective, although the publication stands out for the qualitative density and theoretical sophistication of the studies, there is a noticeable concentration on case study, narrative, and hermeneutic approaches. This is a strength for understanding experiences and meanings, but it leaves open the challenge of articulating these approaches with interregional comparative designs, larger-scale longitudinal studies, or mixed methodologies that allow institutional transformations to be tracked over time. Likewise, the centrality of small, situated samples, consistent with the theoretical frameworks used, invites further reflection on how to engage with the spheres of public policy without losing analytical complexity.

Envisioning Teacher Education for Inclusion in a Contentious Environment

The findings of these studies should be read in light of the present historical conditions. The rise of conservatism, the challenge to diversity, gender, and rights agendas, and the reconfiguration of education under logics of control, standardization, and conflict neutralization directly affect inclusive teacher education. Although several articles report on these tensions, the challenge remains to analyze more precisely how political setbacks impact teacher education curricula, academic working conditions, knowledge production, and the scope of action of teacher educators. In this sense, the findings and reflections presented in the articles in this special issue are not intended to close the debate, but rather to open up a field of problems. Their contributions show that inclusion in initial teacher education is, now more than ever, a structural dispute: over who can be teachers, what knowledge counts, what practices are legitimized, and what futures become possible. The silences identified do not weaken the collection of articles; on the contrary, they point to the urgency of broadening perspectives, territories, and questions at a historic moment in which inclusion, far from being assured, is once again under threat.

The contemporary rise of conservatism is not confronted by a robust and articulated inclusive project, but rather by a previously eroded framework in which inclusion has been separated from the struggles for social justice, redistribution, and recognition. Curricular

ensorship, the prohibition of certain languages, the questioning of gender or disability approaches, and the depoliticization of equity policies do not operate in a vacuum, but rather upon a perspective of inclusion that has been progressively detached from conflict and democratic debate. In this context, initial teacher education takes on a strategic role that goes far beyond the mere transmission of pedagogical competencies. Refocusing inclusion as a radical project involves conceiving teacher education as a space for critical meaning-making, where the structural conditions of exclusion are examined, critical theories for understanding disability and other inequalities are addressed, inclusive experiences are developed, and an understanding of teaching work as a situated, collective, and politically engaged practice is strengthened. It is not a question of educating teachers who are “prepared” to manage diverse classrooms, but rather of educating professionals who are capable of helping to recognize, contest, address, and transform the conditions that produce inequality inside and outside school.

The articles in this special issue are part of that effort. Far from offering prescriptive solutions, they show how initial teacher education is a field marked by political, epistemic, institutional, and experiential disputes, where inclusion can be stripped of critical elements or rearticulated as a project of social justice. By placing initial teacher education at the center, this special issue contributes to the reconstruction of an inclusive education capable of resisting neoliberal capture and conservative challenge, recovering its historical meaning as a constituent part of the right to education.

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Initial Teacher Education and Inclusion: Progress, Setbacks, and Challenges 30 Years after the Salamanca Statement

education policy analysis archives

Volume 34 Number 17 February 24, 2026

ISSN 1068-2341



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