

## RECLAIMING A FORGOTTEN LEGACY: HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION TO SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION AND OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO REALIZE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

While contemporary discussions on special needs education often appear novel and developed country-centric, Islamic civilization has historically prioritized care, education and training for individuals with diverse needs. Rooted in Qur'anic principles, this paper explores the contributions of classical Islamic scholars, institutions, and endowments in supporting learners with special needs, such as the visually and hearing impaired, learning disabilities as well as other diverse needs. Anchored in Qur'anic values of fitrah (natural disposition), diversity, rahmah (mercy), 'adl (justice), equity, 'ilm (knowledge), amanah (trust), karamah (principles of human dignity), ihsan (excellence), and the recognition of individual potential that reflect a deep commitment to inclusive learning and practices in the Islamic civilization. This legacy deeply rooted in the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the Islamic world can inspire contemporary practices, encouraging a revival of Muslim societal attitudes that align with modern approaches to promote accessibility and inclusivity in education. By reclaiming this rich intellectual and ethical heritage, the paper advocates for a reconceptualization of inclusion not merely as a social obligation, but as a Quranic imperative one that models compassionate, dignified, and accessible education for all learners.

**Keywords:** Islamic Civilization, Special Needs Education, Inclusive Education

### INTRODUCTION

The global discourse on inclusive education and special needs learning is predominantly shaped by Western paradigms, often overlooking the profound intellectual, ethical, and practical contributions of non-Western civilizations. This conceptual paper seeks to redress this imbalance by illuminating the overlooked legacy of Islamic civilization in supporting individuals with disabilities and diverse needs. Rooted in Qur'anic principles and the lived practices of historical Muslim communities, this paper highlights the ethical imperatives and innovative strategies that once positioned Islamic societies at the forefront of inclusive education. While Islam has long upheld the ideal of education for all, contemporary narratives have shifted, often sidelining this rich heritage. This paper argues two key points:

- i. Islamic civilization historically embraced inclusive values grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, operationalized through institutions and scholarly engagement.
- ii. Contemporary Muslim societies can reclaim and adapt this legacy to meet and elevate global standards of inclusive education.

### **Background Of The Special Needs Education And Inclusive Paradigm**

The global recognition of disability rights, particularly the right to education has gained significant momentum, driven by key international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goals), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), and the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (1990). These frameworks collectively reflect a progressive commitment to equity and inclusion, and understanding them is essential to appreciating the evolution of global efforts to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities.

Sophie Mitra (2018) emphasized that disability must be understood through multiple intersecting lenses including aging, gender, health, and poverty highlighting its complex and multifaceted nature. The wide spectrum of disabilities among children necessitates a diverse array of support systems and services. West, Sampson, and Shortte (2022) define children with disabilities or special needs as those with formal diagnoses, as well as those whose behavioral, developmental, or health challenges impact their families' ability to provide adequate care. This inclusive definition underscores the intricacies involved in identifying and supporting children with varying needs, including those who remain undiagnosed yet require meaningful intervention.

Diversity in special needs education involves recognizing the uniqueness of each individual and the broad range of conditions encompassed under the term "special needs." These include neurodivergent conditions, learning difficulties, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, behavioral and emotional disorders, communication challenges, and twice-exceptionality (2E), among others. While disability theories and policies that focus on removing barriers and framing disability as a minority or oppressed identity are valuable, they alone are insufficient to address the full spectrum of human development. Therefore, inclusive education must be complemented by preventive interventions, differentiated instruction, and transdisciplinary collaboration to effectively meet the needs of children with diverse challenges.

Inclusion has emerged as a transformative concept shaping various spheres of human life, particularly within the evolving educational landscapes of developed nations. It encompasses values, policies, and practices that affirm the right of every child and their family, regardless of ability to participate fully in a wide range of activities and contexts as integral members of families, communities, and society (West, Sampson, & Shortte, 2022). Through inclusive practices, all children, whether they have diverse needs or not, and their families, can experience a sense of belonging, meaningful relationships, and optimal development and learning.

Rohwerder (2015) identified five distinct models of disability that have evolved over time, reflecting shifts in societal paradigms. These include the charity model, medical model, social model, human rights model, and interactional model. Each model offers a different lens through which disability is understood ranging from viewing disabled

individuals as passive recipients of pity, to recognizing them as rights-bearing citizens, or understanding disability as a product of environmental and societal interaction. The way disability is engaged depends on prevailing knowledge systems, cultural principles, and ethical orientations, resulting in varied approaches to addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities.

From this discussion, it is evident that special needs and inclusive education is a dynamic and evolving field, continually adapting to improve the quality of life for children with diverse needs. Numerous conceptual frameworks have emerged to guide understanding and implementation of inclusive education.

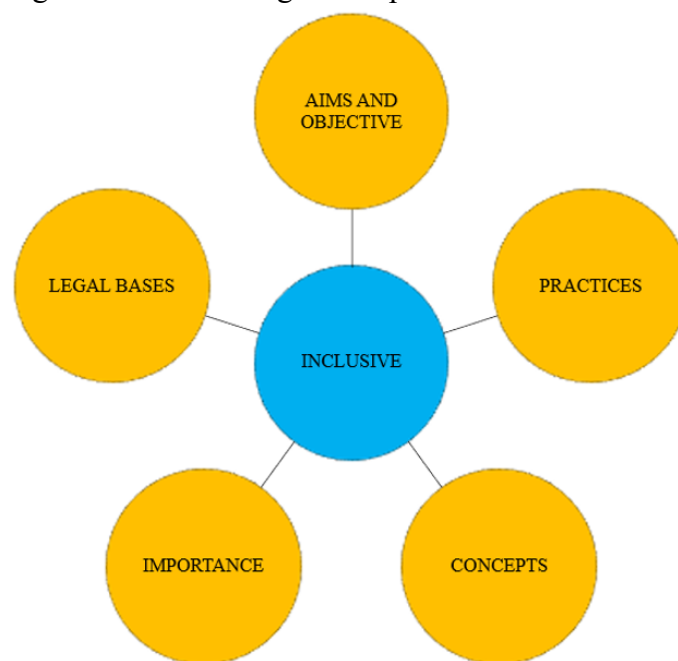


Figure 1 Framework of the Concept Diagram for Inclusive Education

This paper adopts the framework illustrated in Figure 1 by Montenegro (2020), which presents a Concept Diagram for Inclusive Education. The framework integrates multiple elements—models, concepts, principles, legislation, and international declarations which are essential for a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education. It also emphasizes the importance of clearly defined aims and objectives, which serve as the foundation for developing effective inclusive practices. Thus, this conceptual framework is highly relevant for interpreting inclusive education through contemporary lenses.

### **Quranic And Prophetic Foundations Of Inclusion Islamic Legacy And The Literature Gap In Inclusive Education**

Despite the global momentum surrounding inclusive education, there remains a significant gap in literature reflecting the Islamic perspective in this field. Few studies have systematically compiled and disseminated the rich Islamic viewpoints on inclusion, particularly in the context of special needs education. This absence is deeply disheartening, given the profound ethical principles embedded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and the historical legacy of Islamic civilization in advancing education and human dignity. .

Once pioneers and architects of inclusive thought, Muslim societies now find themselves in the role of consumers and followers. This paper seeks to rediscover and reclaim the forgotten legacy of Islamic contributions to inclusive education an endeavor rooted in both historical reverence and contemporary relevance.

Islamic teachings emphasize foundational values such as justice ('adl), equity, mercy (rahmah), human dignity (karamah), and the pursuit of knowledge ('ilm) (Ali, A. & Codina, G., 2025). These virtues are not abstract ideals but are concretely affirmed in the Qur'an, which recognizes the inherent worth of all individuals, regardless of ability. Selected verses include:

- “We have certainly honored the children of Adam” (Qur'an 17:70)
- “O mankind, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another” (Qur'an 49:13)
- “To those weak of understanding give not your property... but feed and clothe them... and speak to them words of kindness and justice” (Qur'an 4:5)
- The story of the blind man and the Prophet (peace be upon him) (Qur'an 80:1–12)
- “And of His signs is the diversity of your languages and colors...” (Qur'an 30:22)
- “Read in the name of your Lord who created...” (Qur'an 96:1–5)
- “Allah will raise those who have believed... and those given knowledge...” (Qur'an 58:11)
- The dialogue between Moses and Khidr (Qur'an 18:65–66)

These verses collectively affirm that Islam advocates education for all and promotes inclusive practices within society. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) exemplified these values in action, notably appointing Ibn Umm Maktum, a blind companion to civic and religious leadership roles. Such examples reflect a practical and spiritually grounded model of inclusion.

## **Quranic And Prophetic Foundations Of Inclusion**

The Quran and Sunnah provide a comprehensive foundation for inclusive education, emphasizing values that align with modern principles of equity and human rights. Justice ('adl), mercy (rahmah), dignity (karamah), and knowledge ('ilm) are central to Islamic ethics. These values are not only spiritual ideals but actionable principles that affirm the worth and potential of every individual. The Quranic verses cited above serve as enduring reminders of Islam's inclusive ethos. Islam is inherently inclusive, advocating for basic human rights and equitable access to education long before the emergence of international declarations such as the UNCRPD. This is evidenced through divine revelation, prophetic practice, and the historical contributions of Islamic civilization to educational thought.

Beyond Quranic teachings, prophetic traditions (hadith) also reinforce inclusive principles. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “Every child is born in a state of fitrah...” a hadith that affirms the innate purity and potential of every human being, regardless of background or ability. This concept of fitrah aligns with the Quranic verse in Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13), which emphasizes human equality and the dignity bestowed upon those who are mindful of Allah (Ali, A. & Codina, G., 2025). These teachings underscore that diversity is not a barrier but a divine sign, and that dignity is rooted in spiritual consciousness, not physical or social attributes.

The Prophet's inclusive practices extended to his companions, many of whom had disabilities. Ibn Umm Maktum, Amr bin Al-Jamuh, Muawiyah bin Al Hakam, and Talhah bin Ubaidullah were among those warmly accepted and entrusted with responsibilities. These examples illustrate that inclusion was not merely theoretical, it was lived and institutionalized in early Islamic society. The Quran and Sunnah also contain numerous injunctions related to *ihsan* (excellence), equity, and justice core components of the social justice paradigm. Surah Al-Ma'un (107) warns against neglecting vulnerable populations, reinforcing the moral obligation to care for those in need (Eris Risnawati & Sunardi, 2018). Islam has long championed religious and humanistic values, positioning itself as a forerunner in ethical education and social responsibility.

Prophet Muhammad's teachings and actions reflect a clear stance against discrimination, including toward individuals with disabilities. These divine commands and prophetic practices resonate with modern disability rights frameworks, which emphasize tolerance, acceptance, and support. Concepts such as *karamah* (human dignity) and *takaful* (mutual support) mirror principles found in the UNCRPD (Muhammad Umar Mehmood & Zahida Parveen, 2024), suggesting a deep compatibility between Islamic ethics and contemporary global standards. An intriguing proposition arises: could the social model of disability find its roots in Islamic teachings? Muhammad Firdaus bin Abu Hasaan and Rosila Bee Mohd. Hussain (2025) explore this idea, noting that Islamic social responsibility aligns with global calls for structural reform to accommodate diverse populations. While international frameworks often emphasize legal and institutional change, Islamic teachings offer a complementary spiritual-ethical approach one that nurtures compassion, dignity, and collective accountability.

Al-Aoufi's (2012) analysis of Quranic verses reveals key insights: persons with disabilities (PWD) have the right to equal education; they should not be underestimated; they are entitled to full societal participation; and they must be encouraged to pursue knowledge and self-empowerment. These principles, deeply embedded in Islamic tradition, have unfortunately been overlooked in contemporary Muslim discourse. Reclaiming them is not only a scholarly imperative but a moral and spiritual duty.

## **Historical Contributions Of Islamic Civilization To Special Needs Education**

Islamic societies during the height of Islamic civilization established exemplary standards in their engagement with individuals with disabilities. Sheltered homes and specialized care facilities were developed to support disabled populations, reflecting a deep societal commitment to inclusion and compassion (Sarah Saleem Binmahfooz, 2024). These services were not peripheral but integral to the social fabric, demonstrating how Islamic communities actively provided for the needs of persons with disabilities. The following discussions highlight key contributions of Islamic civilization to the development of special needs education.

### **1. Institutions and Endowments (Awqaf)**

One of the most enduring legacies of Islamic civilization is the establishment of charitable endowments (*awqāf*), which played a pivotal role in supporting education, healthcare, and social services for individuals with disabilities. *Bimaristans* (medical institutions) offered treatment for mental and neurological conditions, and some included staff trained to work with students with disabilities.

Historical waqf documents reference instructional aids and scribes for blind students, as well as provisions for various categories of disabled individuals (Md. Sirajul Islam & Sofiah Samsudin, 2020). These institutional efforts reflect a structured and compassionate approach to inclusive care and education.

## **2. Scholarly Discourse, Pedagogical Approaches, and Accessibility**

Classical Islamic scholars such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), al-Fārābī, and al-Shāfi‘ī explored differences in cognitive development and learning capacities, laying the groundwork for individualized and differentiated instruction (Goje, K., et al., 2022). Their pedagogical insights can be viewed as precursors to modern inclusive education. Historical records also reveal that scholars with sensory impairments, learning difficulties, and other disabilities actively participated in intellectual discourse and scholarly production (Faisal, A., 2024). Notably, Islamic civilization produced many distinguished disabled scholars, including Abdullah Ibn Umm Maktum and Abdullah bin Mas‘ud, whose contributions underscore the inclusive ethos of the time.

### **The Ethical Framework For Inclusive Education In Islam**

Drawing from the historical and spiritual foundations of Islamic civilization, a values-based framework for inclusive education can be articulated through the following principles:

- Fitrah: Every human is born pure and endowed with potential.
- Rahmah and ‘Adl: Compassion and justice are mandates in educational engagement.
- Amanah: Caring for children with special needs is a sacred trust.
- Karamah: Every individual deserves respect and dignity.
- Ihsan: Excellence must be pursued in educational service delivery.
- ‘Ilm: Education is both a right and a spiritual obligation.

These principles are deeply rooted in Quranic and prophetic traditions and have long guided Muslim societies. However, they must now be actively reclaimed and re-integrated into contemporary educational systems to align with both Islamic values and modern inclusive practices.

### **A Conceptual Framework For Inclusion Based On Islamic Perspectives**

Building upon these ethical foundations, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding inclusion through an Islamic lens. This framework integrates spiritual values with pedagogical strategies, institutional support, and community engagement offering a holistic model that resonates with both historical legacy and present-day aspirations (refer to Figure 2).



Figure 2 The concept of understanding inclusive education according to Islamic perspective

The conceptual framework to understand inclusion based on Islamic perspective above is adapted from the conceptual framework to understand inclusive education designed by Montenegro Roi Vincent (2020). Hopefully this conceptual framework will lead muslims to understand inclusion from Islamic viewpoints. From such understanding, muslim societies can work to realize inclusive education in accordance with Islamic philosophy and principles that goes hand in hand with contemporary concepts. All the elements needed to understand inclusion including aims and objectives; concepts; practices; importance; legal bases; spiritual resources; support and services; and fund are bound by the divine imperative according to Al Quran and As Sunnah. This gives a solid foundation of the inclusive education through a spiritual-ethical model that blends together the social and humanism approach that actually stems from Islamic principles found in Al Quran and As Sunnah. This framework does not focus mainly upon philosophy, concept and principles but most importantly it also stresses upon practicalities such as practices, legal bases, spiritual resources, support and services, and fund. Thus, this spiritual-ethical model is also rooted in realities.

### Contemporary Challenges In Muslim Communities

There still hingers many challenges to the contemporary muslim communities with regards to viewing and implementing inclusive education. Some of the challenges include lack of special education experts from muslim scholars and not many muslim scholars are knowledgeable in the field of special education (Ishak, H., et al., 2020). Ishak (2020) also pointed out that lack of reference resources led to many issues related to justice, teaching methods and lack of awareness. Despite this rich legacy of Islamic civilisation relating to inclusive education, it can be summarized that several barriers persist:

- Cultural stigma and superstitions about disabilities.
- Under-resourced systems lacking trained educators, materials, services, supports and infrastructure.
- Weak legal frameworks to enforce inclusive education.
- Religious misinterpretation, where exclusion is erroneously justified through misunderstood texts.

The above summarized challenges are the main challenges face by muslim societies in relation to inclusive education. All relevant parties and education field stakeholders in the muslim countries need to consider the challenges and find appropriate solutions to overcome the challenges.

### **Reviving The Legacy: Strategic Recommendations**

There exists not only a literature vacuum in contemporary Islamic world with regards to disability studies and inclusive education but a sizeable gap between Islamic values and current practices. To bridge the gap between Islamic values and current practice especially in muslim communities, the following actions are recommended:

- i. Curriculum reform to include Islamic views on inclusion in teacher training.
- ii. Religious outreach using mosques and khutbahs (sermons) to combat stigma.
- iii. Policy advocacy for inclusive education legislation.
- iv. Revival of modern awqāf to support infrastructure and training.
- v. Scholarly research and strategic collaboration to further explore Islamic educational contributions and enhance collaborative efforts in advocating inclusion.
- vi. Community-based interventions rooted in empathy and knowledge throughout the muslim communities.

Various government agencies and the public sector especially those connected to education, health, welfare, law and society development must take necessary actions to implement the recommended solutions. Other parties such as universities and colleges, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, community-based organizations and private sectors should also play their roles in establishing the desired structures of inclusion. Furthermore, all Islamic nations should collaborate to reinvent inclusive education in accordance with Islamic imperatives.

### **CONCLUSION**

Islamic civilization possesses a deeply rooted, though often forgotten, legacy of inclusive education grounded in Quranic values and the Prophetic model. By revitalizing this tradition, Muslim communities can develop education systems that are not only ethically grounded but also aligned with contemporary standards. Inclusion, from this perspective, is not a modern concession—it is a Quranic imperative that demands justice, dignity, and compassionate excellence for all learners.

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