The politics of inclusion: Reflections of policymakers on evidence informed policy in Ireland and South Africa

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Abstract

Context: As many national education systems grapple with long-term and entrenched systems of special education, there is a policy shift towards a human rights approach and changing attitudes towards inclusive education. Legislative reform in special and inclusive education is, therefore, taking place in many countries.

The aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, to examine the mechanisms for knowledge exchange in special and inclusive education between academics and government policy officials looking, in particular, at the experience in the Republic of Ireland and South Africa and, secondly, to explore ways in which to improve and enhance relations in the future.

Methods: Using qualitative interviews with senior policy officials from Departments of Education and other senior government officials in the Republic of Ireland and South Africa, this paper provides a thematic data analysis highlighting common themes and comparing two North-South national contexts.

Findings: The findings of this analysis show that despite the stark differences between the social and economic contexts of Ireland and South Africa, both countries share great challenges in the inclusive education policy making space. The role of politics, and the strong influence of parental and civil society lobbying, in influencing inclusive education policy appears to dominate with policymakers adopting an incremental, piecemeal, approach in which to bring about small-scale changes. Finally, the role of academic research and higher education institutes was limited in both countries with a perceived lack of empirical evidence by policymakers. In the absence of research evidence, policymakers frequently relied on their own value judgements and turned to small scale pilot initiatives to guide decision making.

Conclusion: This paper suggests the need for a sustained mechanism for knowledge management and knowledge brokerage in inclusive education policy development. It highlights the need for universities to develop and maintain 'front of shop' services so that policymakers can easily identify relevant research expertise and research offices.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Education, Policy, Research, Ireland, South Africa

Points of interest:

- The findings of this article explore the extent to which government and universities can work together to share research and ideas to create better education policies.
- The article examines how governments seek to negotiate commitments to special and inclusive education while responding to the perspectives of parents, teachers, and expert stakeholders in the policy development process.
- The findings highlight the difficulties in making changes, such as political pressures, lack of empirical evidence, and different views on what works best for students.
- The article suggests ways to create spaces for discussions, using research to guide decisions, and making sure policies meet the needs of all students and teachers.

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Introduction

Inclusive education is a contested term in education systems around the world (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a). International debates on the moral, legal, and financial implications of educating some students in segregated settings based on characteristics such as disability, continue (Alves, 2020; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). Many national education systems are grappling with the complexity and cost of historical systems of special education; a greater emphasis on human rights in education; and changing attitudes towards educational inequality and exclusion. Legislative reform is, therefore, taking place in many countries seeking to create more equitable and inclusive education systems. Tensions exist however, with polarised debates on special and inclusive education, resulting in greater scrutiny of the policy development process with governments increasingly aware of the need to be transparent and accountable in policy change.

Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) are being increasingly highlighted for the critical role they play in generating and disseminating evidence-based knowledge which can be utilised to address a wide range of complex global challenges (Davis, 2012; Hughes et al., 2016; Ramaswamy et al., 2021). Studies stress how effective policy making is enhanced through collaborative knowledge exchange activities between HEI's and external stakeholders (Cuthill et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2019; Weerasinghe & Dedunu, 2020). Evidence-informed policies, therefore, are those derived from a broad range of research evidence from various stakeholders (including HEIs) and existing policies and practices through a process which acknowledges current social, economic and political climate (Newman et al., 2012) within different national contexts.

Despite an expanding literature on policy development processes more generally, research specific to inclusive education policy development is relatively scarce. This paper seeks to examine the factors affecting the inclusive education policy development process in two countries one located in the Global North and one in the Global South. Comparing policy development in the Republic of Ireland and South Africa, it examines the mechanisms for knowledge exchange to support policy development in special and inclusive education between Higher Education Institutions and government policy officials. The rationale for comparison is that both national contexts are undergoing major reforms of inclusive education legislation at present. The contrast between the middle to low-income context of South Africa with its high levels of inequality and the wealthier and more equitable Irish context provides an insight into the role of resources in policy implementation.

In Ireland, a Ministerial Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) is currently underway, involving an expert advisory panel and extensive public consultation. Ireland's commitment to achieving its United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), and its 2018 ratification of the United Nations Convention on Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), are instrumental in this process. In South Africa, a review is underway to assess the implementation of the 2001 Education White Paper 6, Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (EWP6) (Department of Education, 2001), and to identify areas requiring new directions in alignment with the UNCRPD and the SDGs, to which South Africa is a signatory. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with senior policy officials in Ireland and South Africa, this paper seeks to capture two key areas of knowledge: firstly, the ways in which policymakers and academia exchange knowledge in the policy development process and, secondly to explore the potential of this collaboration for effective policy development in the future.

The Global Education Monitoring report guides the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4; Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The 2020 *Global Education Monitoring Report Inclusion and education: All means all* focuses on an ongoing process of transforming education systems so that every learner, regardless of identity, background or ability, is welcomed, valued, respected, and able to participate and learn without discrimination (UNESCO, 2020b). While there are many debates and critical discussions on its relation to special education, it is not the focus of this study. We approach the topic of inclusion from an empirical perspective, aiming to shed light on how inclusive education is understood within each of these countries, but guided by the GEM framework.

Previous research on evidence informed policy development

Over the past three decades, a substantial literature has developed around evidence informed policy development and the relationship between research and public policy. Studies argue that we should not assume that this is a linear process where research findings are 'applied' to policy but instead that the policymaking process is complex and something negotiated within the political and social contexts (Cairney, 2016; Nutley et al., 2007). Majone's (1989) work highlights how policy development is shaped by both argumentation and persuasion and the available research evidence (Majone, 1989). Within the literature, many have sought to distinguish between 'knowledge transfer' and 'knowledge exchange' with the idea of 'transfer' suggesting the movement of information from researchers to policymakers. More recently, this relationship has been reframed as interactive, relational, and co productive, emphasising dialogue and collaboration between policy and academic communities (Boaz et al., 2019). Existing research suggests that policymakers' engagement with research or academia more generally is shaped by a combination of factors including institutional capacity, organisational cultures, time constraints, and the perceived relevance and accessibility of research outputs (Oliver et al., 2014). Studies show that research evidence is only one of many influences alongside political priorities, stakeholder pressures and resource considerations. Policymakers frequently value research that is timely, contextually grounded, and synthesised in usable formats, reinforcing the importance of ongoing relationships between researchers and decision makers rather than one off dissemination (Head, 2010).

Theoretically, research on evidence informed policy development and knowledge exchange between higher education and government can be viewed through the lens of critical policy analysis (CPA) which examines how power, ideology, and institutional structures can influence the ways in which knowledge is considered legitimate, which priorities are advanced, and how policy decisions are justified (Ball, 2012; Braun et al., 2011). This approach suggests that research evidence does not exist in a neutral space but that the process of policy development is shaped by competing interests, stakeholder pressures, and broader societal narratives. Rather than treating research evidence as objective, the paper uses CPA to understand how knowledge around special and inclusive education is produced, mobilised, legitimised, and contested among policymakers and within broader policy environments. This allows for greater insights into how respondents understood their own expertise, navigated institutional constraints and perhaps more importantly, how they negotiated competing priorities.

In this study, critical policy analysis (CPA) is adopted as both a theoretical lens and an analytical framework. Drawing on Ball (2012) and Braun et al. (2011), CPA conceptualises policy not as a neutral or technical process, but as a socially constructed and politically situated practice shaped by power relations, institutional contexts, and dominant discourses. Rather than treating research evidence as objective or self-evident, CPA attends to how knowledge is produced, mobilised, legitimised, and contested within policy environments. This perspective sensitised the analysis to the ways participants articulated authority, framed expertise, navigated institutional constraints, and negotiated competing priorities.

It is within this body of scholarship that the present paper is situated. The contribution of the study lies in providing empirical insight into the relational, contextual, and interactional practices through which policymakers and academics engage with one another, and through which research becomes meaningful in policy environments. By focusing on lived experiences and grounded practices of senior policy officials from the Global North and South, the paper contributes to an emerging conversation about how evidence is co-produced, negotiated, and mobilised in real policy settings across differing national contexts.

Evidence informed policy development in Ireland and South Africa

In Ireland, there is a growing body of evidence indicating the importance of research in guiding evidence-informed policymaking (DFHERIS, 2023). Increasingly, HEI's are being asked to identify solutions to national problems, including in inclusive education (DFHERIS, 2023; Doyle et al., 2023;

Ó Foghlú & Boyle, 2024; Ó Foghlú et al., 2025). Consistent with the government's commitment to evidence informed policy development, significant advances have also been made in research designed to inform policy across higher education institutions in Ireland. Key stakeholders within this field include the *Campus Engage* programme, which aims to build capacity and research for policy work in Irish universities (Ó Foghlú & Boyle, 2024; Ó Foghlú et al., 2025) and the establishment of the *Research and Innovation Policy Advisory Forum* (Ó Foghlú & Boyle, 2024; Ó Foghlú et al., 2025). Furthermore, research and policy development units have been created within several different departments to improve the evidence base informing policy development. A specialised *Evidence for Policy* stakeholder advisory group, has been established to develop a framework for evidence-informed policy development (Doyle et al., 2023; Ó Foghlú & Boyle, 2024; Ó Foghlú et al., 2025). Despite these initiatives, challenges continue to exist with a need for greater consistency in the approaches to policy development. Consequently, a 2023 OECD report (OECD, 2023) suggests the need for 'best practice mechanisms for knowledge generation and transfer between research bodies and academics with the aim of improving the quality of inputs and evidence-informed policy development' (OECD, 2023, p. 22). Central to this is the creation of a framework to support aligned research dissemination for the purpose of supporting public policy development and engagement (Doyle, 2023).

In South Africa, strategic initiatives include knowledge interchange and collaborations, where the government and the researcher community work together. The Academy of Science for South Africa (ASSAf) was established in 1996 with the aim of advancing and utilising scientific reasoning for societal benefit. Additionally, South Africa's Evaluation Network (SAENet) originated from a collective of evaluators nationwide, eventually evolving into the formalised South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) (Stewart et al., 2019). The Department of Science and Technology (DST) initiated a workshop and seminar program in 2011, administered through the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), aimed at fostering engagement between researchers and policymakers and enhancing the science-policy interface.

The country's network of 26 public universities is generating an increasing volume of research evidence. These efforts are supported by a growing number of academic centres and departments specifically dedicated to producing research that contributes to the objectives outlined in the National Development Plan (NDP). Examples include the Centre of Excellence for Nutrition at the University of the North West, which focuses on generating research to inform the NDP; resources like the South African SDG Hub for accessing research to guide development decision-making; institutions like the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance at the University of Cape Town, which enhance understanding of the policy and planning process; and entities like the Africa Centre for Evidence at the University of Johannesburg, which compile evidence for informed decision-making (Stewart et al., 2019). These policy-focused entities within universities prioritise relevance to government priorities, representing a shift from research solely for academic purposes.

Inclusive education policy development in Ireland and South Africa

Although the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) in Ireland marked an important policy commitment to a rights-based framework for students with special educational needs, its implementation has remained partial. Core elements of the Act, including statutory assessment and individual education planning provisions, were never fully commenced. At the same time, Ireland has seen a marked expansion of special education provision, particularly special classes, contributing to the development of a dual system in which inclusive policy aspirations sit alongside increasing segregation. There has been a review of this Act ongoing since 2022 involving a large-scale consultation with education stakeholders with the aim of guiding new legislation for students with disabilities in special and mainstream education. Alongside possible legislative changes, a landmark policy report was published by the National Council for Special Education which was based on an extensive national consultation undertaken in 2019. The primary objective of this policy advice is:

> 'The progressive realisation of the inclusive education system for Ireland' (Policy recommendation 1.1) (NCSE, 2024).

The recommendation details the aim of achieving a system of education where every child can attend their local school and acknowledges the progress made to move some cohorts of students out of specialist settings into mainstream settings in recent decades. Despite these recent policy developments, there is little consensus on the future role of the long-established special education sector, and how it can respond to increasing student diversity. This is particularly evident in the dramatic expansion of special classes since 2010 (700% at post-primary increase between 2010 and 2022) and the more recent expansion of special schools with an increase in both the number of special schools and the number of learners attending these settings (NCSE, 2024).

As the driver of inclusive education implementation in South Africa, EWP6 sought to enact the principles of the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) and extend the South African Schools Act of 1996, to address the segregated education system inherited from the apartheid era. The goal was to establish an inclusive education and training system within the timeframe of 20 years, through the development of a system of support coordinated at an education district level, comprising special schools as resource centres, full-service schools and school-based support teams. This support system was to be responsible for placement of learners in the most appropriate learning environment, allocating necessary support in this environment. Capacity building for an inclusive education system included extensive teacher training, advocacy and awareness throughout the education system and awareness raising amongst families as well as in civil society. However, 23 years on from the release of this policy there is a recognition that it has not achieved its stated goals and, in some respects, has failed students with disabilities (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The percentage of children of school-going age with disabilities who are out of school is disputed but estimates range from 70% (Bornman & Donohue, 2013) to 10% of students with disabilities between the ages of 7 and 15 (Department of Basic Education, 2023). The DBE figure is treated with a large degree of scepticism as there is little evidence of such an enormous increase of provision on the ground. Students with disabilities who are in school, are mostly still in segregated or separate special schools. EWP6 was originally implemented as an incremental implementation of inclusion with pilot projects and it was intended to be evaluated after 20 years (Department of Education, 2001).

The current South African policy review process, carried out by a Ministerial Task Team represents a synergy with the EPSEN review occurring in Ireland and provides a research and learning opportunity in real time for the researchers to explore. The research question that we wished to address is: 'What can be learned about the interface between academic researchers and government policymakers through a comparison of related processes occurring in Ireland and South Africa?'.

Methodology

This study draws on data from Ireland and South Africa to explore policymaker perspectives on inclusive and special education. While it could be read as a comparative study, it is more accurately positioned as two illustrative case studies, providing insights from different policy contexts rather than aiming for direct cross-national comparison. The pairing of Ireland and South Africa was chosen to reflect both high- and middle-income settings with longstanding commitments to inclusive education but divergent historical, political, and resource contexts. In particular, South Africa's legacy of apartheid has produced deep inequities in educational access and provision, creating persistent challenges in ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all students.

The analysis in this paper is based on six online and face-to-face interviews with three Irish (two in one interview) and four South African experts on inclusive education policy, undertaken in 2024. The interviewees were purposely selected by the PIs of a broader research study as individuals with deep and rich involvement in inclusive education policy development and legislative reform in Ireland and South Africa, most of them over an extended period of time. This selection was based on the interviewees' perceived capacity to make a valuable contribution to the aims of the study. While these interviewees were known to the authors, this is through ongoing professional relationships which place no obligation for participation, other than collegiality and a desire to share relevant and possibly helpful information. The authors acknowledge that the purposive sampling strategy adopted in this paper, brings with it, limitations on the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, we understand that

professional familiarity with interviewees may have introduced potential bias in selection and responses. Given the small and highly specialised policymaking communities in both contexts, the sample prioritised depth of expertise over representativeness, consistent with qualitative elite interviewing approaches.

The authors for this paper are based in universities in Ireland and South Africa and work within ongoing debates on inclusive and special education. Our professional engagement with policymakers and schools means we approach this topic with an existing commitment to equity in education. We acknowledge that these perspectives informed how the study was framed and how the findings were interpreted. Rather than claiming neutrality, we make this positioning explicit in line with reflexive qualitative research practice.

For reasons of confidentiality, the specific roles and positions of interviewees are not identified, as this level of detail would risk compromising their anonymity given the small size of the policymaking community in both jurisdictions.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted online or in person depending on availability and geographic constraints of the interviewee. The semi-structured format allowed interviewees to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives while ensuring coverage of key topics, such as evidence-informed policymaking, inclusive education strategies, and the interplay between special and inclusive education in their national contexts.

Five of the interviews (one from Ireland, four from South Africa) were held online using Zoom. One face-to-face interview was held with two Irish policymakers. Each of the interviews was undertaken with the informed consent of interviewees. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from both Trinity College Dublin and the University of Cape Town ethics boards.

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed using Otter.ai (an AI transcription and collaboration tool that changes spoken words into text) and analysed using a thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The initial coding involved sorting responses under broad thematic headings followed by the analysis which progressed this beyond simple categorisation. These steps align with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, and included our familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming themes. To maintain analytical transparency, it should be noted that some preliminary codes were discarded during the iterative refinement process when they were found to be insufficiently supported or overlapping with other themes. This ensured that the final thematic structure reflected coherent and meaningful patterns across all of the interviews held.

As mentioned above, CPA informed both data collection and analysis during the research. Interviews were designed to elicit interviewees' experiences of using research and accessing knowledge more generally. The focus of the interviews was to better understand the organisational and political contexts that shaped decision-making. During the analysis, it was possible to understand how the different interviewees positioned themselves and others during the policy development process but also how politics and accountability were constructed in their narratives. The coding process was detailed and focused thematically on individual patterns of thought, institutional factors influencing thinking, and key points of tension across the differing policy contexts.

Before moving on to the findings section of this paper, it is worth noting that we did not assume fixed definitions of inclusive or special education in our analysis. As a collective, the authors agreed that the interviewees draw on differing understandings of inclusion and special education in ways that, perhaps, reflect broader political, institutional, and professional commitments. In doing so, the paper highlights how the binary categories of special and inclusive education are mobilised in policy debate, even when practice on the ground is far more hybrid and fluid. While they sometimes appear as binaries in policy discourse, this paper treats them as interrelated and politically negotiated constructs that shape how systems organise support and allocate resources.

Findings

First challenge: The politics of special education within an inclusive paradigm

The role of politics and political pressure more generally emerged as a significant driver of inclusive education policy development among interviewees in South Africa and Ireland. One South African policy official acknowledged the need to 'accept that you are working within a political environment' (Int 6 SA) and another, described how civil servants often 'have to do advocacy with politicians' (Int 2 IRE) on issues of special and inclusive education. This is based on the assumption that politicians have their own views and are often swayed by voter demands rather than the right to inclusion and equity in education. Some of those interviewed specifically referred to the influence of differing political ideologies on policy commitment to inclusion with some politicians seeking to satisfy voters by promoting special education:

> 'they [politicians] felt that they could gain most political kudos by opening special schools and keep everyone, keep the voters happy you know' (Int 5 SA).

This was described by another interviewee as the 'political and administrative interface' (Int 6 SA) in policy development which also involved other education stakeholders such as civil society and advocacy groups. He felt that it is impossible for the public service to remain neutral when a specific political ideology around special or inclusive education is present in government. The role of civil society organisations in this process appears to add a layer of complexity as these organisations are not homogeneous 'they are quite different, and in certain instances, you'll find their ideologies conflict with each other' (Int 6 SA).

The findings suggest a great deal of polarisation around the issue of special and inclusive education which interviewees argue stifles rational debate and policy development. In Ireland, parents constitute a strong lobby for the retention of special services (schools or classes) as they linked this to the provision of resources to support their child's learning:

> 'politicians talk to our parents, they talk to people in their constituencies, and the only people who go to their constituency offices are people with problems…and the problem for us in terms of inclusive education is that the politicians who in turn talk to the ministers, they present a narrative, which is entirely focused on segregated provision' (Int 2 IRE).

In South Africa, although parents have frequently acted as strong advocates for inclusion, this commitment is often tested by the difficulties they encounter in securing admission and appropriate support for their children in regular schools. Furthermore, the perpetuation of a medical model approach to disability, reinforces for parents the advice that their children will be better catered for in a specialised setting, despite growing evidence to the contrary (Int 3, 6 SA).

Irish policy officials also described the 'political nervousness at doing anything which is perceived to disadvantage either cohort (special or inclusive)' and how a significant part of their job is, therefore, to balance these diverse views and implement policy 'in a non-threatening way' (Int 2 IRE). In introducing any change in the system, gaining buy-in from the various stakeholders appears to be paramount. In particular, they highlighted the need to handle two very different and often competing agendas: on one hand, the policy advice for the 'progressive realisation of inclusive education' where every child has the right to be meaningfully included their local mainstream school (NCSE, 2024), and, on the other hand, 'parents, advocacy groups, schools, school leaders wanting to continue to have very specialist provision' (Int 2 IRE).

One interviewee described how South Africa is 'always the first to ratify international declarations' but noted the lack of intention by the government to translate that 'into systemic and legal reform' (Int 3 SA). She argued that South Africa is standing 'at a knife's edge' regarding inclusive education as this (Ministerial Review) is probably the last time that 'we could ever influence a system to change as radically as it should to meet the needs of the country' (Int 3 SA).

The strength and legacy of the special education sector emerged in the interviews. This mindset appears to be 'entrenched' and those working in the system cannot interpret policy very easily outside their own 'paradigm':

> 'there's too strong a special school sector, there is a whole industry being built up in academia to bolster special needs education, and I don't think there's enough voices in the country speaking up for inclusivity as the best possible model' (Int 3 SA).

Another interviewee noted the deficit thinking within South Africa's education policy environment and what he described as the 'deafening silence around the development of an inclusive education curriculum' in government. He describes 'a collective and social amnesia' among bureaucrats who emerged from the struggle environment in South Africa but who ignore the past where they 'believed in combating poverty and promoting social mobility' and instead, hold a conservative, 'narrow viewpoint is akin to blaming the victim' (Int 4 SA).

In Ireland, the interviews also showed a tension between preserving established structures, often associated with segregated provision, and pursuing broader systemic transformation toward genuine inclusion. Irish policymakers emphasised the importance of a progressive continuum of educational placements, seeking to balance the development of inclusive education with the retention of existing effective practices. As one interviewee explained:

> '…we have to have a vision… that is a sufficiently flexible vehicle in our view to get from where we are to where we need to be. And it is non-threatening, because it has a flexibility that allows you to keep what's good in the system' (Int 2 IRE).

This approach reflects an incremental strategy, aiming to foster inclusion while avoiding abrupt disruption to the current system.

In South Africa, the policy outcome of the development of EWP6 was seen on the one hand as a missed opportunity:

> '…and at that time the country was undergoing change. Therefore, there was an appetite for change. What I'm saying is that if you look at Education White Paper 6, we had an opportunity because there was like, this thing was open. We're open to discussion. I think between the consultative paper and the policy and the white paper we lost some opportunities' (Int 6 SA).

But on the other hand, there was a recognition that it might have been as far as inclusive education policy could be pushed against the backdrop of a strong special education lobby, buoyed by the drive toward equitable provision of better resources for black children in special schools, which had previously been reserved only for white children (Int 3 SA).

Second challenge: Perceived lack of relevant research

Interviewees were asked about the role of research evidence in guiding policy decisions in government. Based on the interviews, it does not appear that there is any structured approach to the use of research evidence to guide policy decisions in either country. When asked about the use of research, one interviewee described the 'dearth of really robust research that supports us' (Int 2 SA). The different timelines and pressures on policymakers affected the understanding of what counts as evidence. Policymakers in Ireland were concerned to present evidence that policies 'worked' where they could develop and run them successfully without drawing more from existing budgets. They felt that achieving this would provide a persuasive argument to the government to fund further such initiatives. This was more of a fragmented agenda where opportunities were sought and exploited to provide services that developed inclusive education models (Int 2 IRE). This research, however, appears to be

needed by policy officials in response to political questions around the value of inclusive education over special education rather than informing policy development:

> 'so does it work is the question that the ministers will ask…does the research tell us that it works in Switzerland, or in Australia, or South Africa, wherever it is? And it's very, very hard to say that, yes, we have this body of research, we've taken down off the shelf, we've analysed really carefully, and it just proves that it's all sweetness and light, because it's just not there' (Int 2 IRE).

It is clear that such an approach forecloses new and innovative ways of thinking that could be generated by comparative or theoretical research.
When research is available, interviewees expressed concern about making this research accessible and manageable for time-constrained politicians and policymakers. One policy official described the need for 'practical' research 'that works on the solutions' (Int 2 IRE). She highlighted the bureaucratic nature of how research is commissioned and felt that although there is 'lots of research out there' by different agencies it could be used more effectively across and within government departments:

> 'how can we access all these documents? Where is all of that when you need it? And how can you get at it in a hurry to see, instead of having to commission more research, is there one that was done last year? (Int 2 IRE).

Accessing relevant research evidence was also viewed as a challenge by South African policy officials which they attribute in part to not taking up their own responsibility as government:

> 'we have not clarified, we have not put it clear what we would like research to be about… once we see how research could enhance our work, then we would be able to do so (Int 6 SA).

He stressed the need for research to be part of the early stages of policy development and should be 'infused' into policy making as: '...once the policies are in place, it's very difficult to listen to other things that come from outside' (Int 6 SA).

Third challenge: Piecemeal approaches to policy development in Ireland and South Africa

The findings suggest that policymakers are seeking to counter political concerns and barriers to evidence-based policy development through incremental or small-scale research and interventions. In Ireland, they described how funding for research from the general education budget may be subject to criticism for taking resources away from schools. To work around this issue, they described a process built upon marshalling resources from outside the regular education system and using this to develop pilot projects, which can then demonstrate their value. Interviewees had sought funding from outside the department for the purpose of small-scale pilot projects:

> 'when we get the outcome of [the pilot study]...it will give us we hope, a wealth of evidence that will allow us to be more inclusive. But it won't come at the expense of what we needed to do today' (Int 2 IRE).

The South African counterparts adopted a different position on the incremental nature of policy making. One suggestion was to make small changes, similar to the Irish approach, but to choose very strategically the areas in which to make these changes:

> 'so in other words, we're not taking 10 things, not taking the whole system. We're taking a few things that …we think will have the biggest impact. And when we propose these things, they look small, but we know where we are going with these things that we're looking at systemic change' (Int 6 SA).

The inclusion of Universal Design for Learning in curriculum development was also seen as having potential for 'shifting the narrative away from special education. because it's a very powerful narrative' (Int 4 SA).

Way to improve and enhance policy development: developing relations

Findings show that in the relationship between academics and policymakers, the government can be defensive:

> 'one example is the work of the ministerial committee. And I haven't seen academics come into this environment and influence or shift the debate because I think bureaucrats are quite guarded…and severely defensive' (Int 4 SA).

There is an antipathy from some government officials toward the perceived lack of applicability of academic work:

> 'so for me, I think that's what we need to do we need to plan I think because we can tell right away like in the conceptual framework, we can say no, we must not, you must not make it sound too academic. You must not make it sound like that because it's like it's stigmatised' (Int 6 SA).

While interviewees acknowledge the importance of evidence informed policy development they also acknowledged some challenges in collaborating with HEIs, specifically that here is no clear research agenda to frame the collaboration between academics and policymakers. This was seen as a two-way problem. On the one hand, government has failed to clarify what research would support their work and demonstrates a lack of understanding about how research can enhance their work (Int 6 SA). On the other hand, academics are not producing the quality of research that can be used for decision making purposes and there is a mismatch between the two parties on the research topics, the timing and the accessibility of the research (Int 2 IRE).

One South African interviewee described a chasm or split between 'the academic world and government world' and the way that they see their role (Int 6 SA). On the one hand, he speaks about government's failure to acknowledge and utilise the research skills of its own employees:

> 'let's say you have a person who has a PhD in a specific area of teacher development [in government]. You don't see them lecturing. You don't see them at universities. They have lots of experience within the government, but they're not sharing it with anyone' (Int 6 SA).

Conversely, he refers to the disconnect that often exists between academics and the reality of what is happening in government:

> 'you have academics who don't have any experience in government having been forced to talk about what is happening in government and they don't really know' (Int 6 SA).

The fact that academics do not have a good understanding of how the bureaucracy works was also emphasised by another South African interviewee (Int 4 SA).

There exist enormous time pressures on government officials that often limit their capacity to spend time on research. Both South African and Irish policymakers noted that there is little time available to read or engage deeply with research that is produced (Int 3 SA). Irish policymakers spoke of the challenge of the pressures to meet the demands of their roles within tight timeframes and the limitations this places on them to undertake research themselves or even at times to adequately build in evaluation of the programmes they are undertaking (Int 2 IRE). The findings from interviewees suggest the need for research reports that are concise, clearly structured, and focused on actionable insights, with

executive summaries and key findings highlighted, to ensure they are accessible and usable within the time constraints of their policy work.

Several interviewees highlighted the potential consequences of publishing research that is perceived as inaccurate or poorly grounded. One Irish interviewee noted:

> 'often the backlash caused from publishing this kind of irresponsible or poor research is harmful and time consuming to address' (Int 2 IRE).

This concern was echoed by a South African policymaker, who highlighted how:

> 'research is stigmatised when assumptions or incorrect assertions are made about what is happening in government and this can call into question the quality of the research' (Int 6 SA).

This raises the challenge of what happens when the results of research are discredited and how this may affect both the influence of evidence on policy and the willingness of researchers to engage with sensitive policy issues. This suggests the need for rigorous, contextually informed, evidence-based research when engaging with policy processes.

What is needed going forward?

Both Irish and South African interviewees emphasised the importance of policy development processes that are informed by empirical evidence drawn from classroom and administrative practice. They sought research that reflects the experiences of teachers, parents and students, to ensure that policies are not developed that 'don't find expression on the ground' (Int 5 SA). A strong suggestion from one South African interviewee was to establish forums for ongoing collaboration between government researchers and academics to align research with policy needs. He clearly stated:

> 'we need to have a research agenda for the sector, to say these are the things that we agree we want research on for the next 5,10 or 15 years' (Int 6 SA).

This highlights the need for research to be contextually relevant and attuned to the institutional and political environments in which policy is enacted.

Irish policymakers stressed the need for research that is contextually relevant, that is, research that takes into consideration the reality of where the system currently is and makes recommendations for improvements that are 'realistic, doable and build on the capacity of the system' (Int 2 IRE). Interestingly, South African interviewees, whilst also supportive of the need for contextually relevant research, were not afraid to challenge the status quo in the education system and spoke about the need for academics to 'advance a counter hegemonic strategy' (Int 4 SA). This interviewee argued that 'academics are in powerful positions, and they can use their power in various spaces to advance a particular narrative' (Int 4 SA). This highlights the need for academics to adopt a transformative research agenda in inclusive education, particularly where long-standing assumptions about ability and the special needs paradigm continue to shape policy and practice (Int 3 SA).

Interviewees also highlighted the value of comparative research in policy development. They recognised that there is a risk of only examining evidence from your own context as it may limit the policy approach you adopt. Evidence from other jurisdictions can play a role in filling some of the gaps or shortcomings in the policy space in a local context (Int 5 SA).

Irish interviewees stressed that research should be robust, high quality, showing evidence of what works (Int 2 IRE). Support for this idea of HEI's conceptualising and implementing 'pilot' projects that are budgeted, field tested and evaluated and assessed for scalability was also found amongst South African interviewees (Int 4 SA). The value of being able to show evidence of projects that could be scalable or replicable was identified as a useful way forward by policymakers from both countries.

Both Irish and South African policymakers spoke of the need for constant and deliberate interaction and interface between government and academia (Int 6 SA). One South African interviewee noted how these opportunities give government officials the opportunity to 'lift their heads up' from the business of what they are doing in implementing existing policies, to critically engage and contemplate reforms (Int 3 SA). One Irish policy official suggested the need for a research repository that gives policymakers access to the vast body of research that could inform inclusive education policy that is available, making it much more easily accessible (Int 2 IRE).

The interviews reveal persistent tensions at the heart of policy making in inclusive education in both national contexts reflecting long acknowledged dilemmas in the field, such as the challenge of promoting equality and participation within systems that continue to rely on categorisation and separation to allocate support (Nilholm, 2006). Policymakers in both contexts appear to navigate competing pressures: responding to parental advocacy for specialised provision while simultaneously advancing commitments to inclusive systems. This aligns with critiques of special education that argue that segregated structures, even when well intentioned, risk reinforcing deficit-based understandings of disability and maintaining existing social hierarchies (Tomlinson, 2017). The findings therefore illustrate not simply administrative or technical challenges, but deeper political and philosophical tensions about who education systems are designed for and how support should be organised.

Discussion

The findings above provide rich insights into the ways in which policymakers and academics communicate and exchange knowledge in the policy development process. Stemming from this analysis, we now examine how these findings can inform and improve future collaboration for effective policy development. The findings suggest four key areas that are central to understanding evidence-informed policy development: politics, relevance, collaboration and implementation. Using critical policy analysis as a theoretical lens in which to interpret the findings, it is clear that inclusive education research evidence does not operate in a neutral environment but instead it is interpreted, contested, and mediated through institutional priorities, stakeholder interests, and prevailing assumptions about education.

Politics

Policymakers stressed that they work in a highly political environment with accountability to various stakeholders (Roberts-Hull & Jensen, 2022). Research evidence seems only to be one part of this environment, alongside dominant narratives around special education specifically and ideological assumptions on difference and otherness that underpin education systems more broadly. The dominance of the special school/deficit narrative was identified as a critical ideological issue. In both country settings, there is a disjuncture between the public or parental beliefs around disability and education, and inclusive policy intent. This plays out in contradictory policy implementation where the 'progressive realisation of inclusive education' (NCSE, 2024) in Ireland is measured by progress in special education initiatives and results in ever increasing numbers of special classes. Similarly in South Africa, the number of special schools within an inclusive system is growing and funding for inclusive education remains locked up in special schools. Strategies to address this include an incremental approach in Ireland referred to as 'putting inclusion on life support' (Int 2 IRE), rather than confronting the issue head on and failing to implement inclusive policy as envisaged. In South Africa, a more radical approach of using the current policy review process to bring in the changes was espoused. Understanding these political and ideological dynamics is essential to interpreting how evidence can inform policy in meaningful ways.

Relevance

Policymakers appear to prioritise evidence that addresses immediate challenges and favour short-term and solution-oriented approaches that can be used to justify budgets or political decisions (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024). The findings show that there is no structured process for ongoing research in respect of policy linkage and information sharing. In both contexts, the government does not appear to be active in setting the research agenda but instead the focus appears to be on understanding 'what works' in inclusive education. There does seem to be scope for researchers to translate international practice into local contexts despite the risk of importing ideas from different countries. Evidence that challenges established norms or introduces new theoretical perspectives may be overlooked, highlighting the importance of translating and contextualising research in ways that resonate with the policy environment. Academic researchers may have a role in bringing in theoretical and methodological innovations that can contribute to a more cohesive policy agenda.

Collaboration

While collaborations between government and researchers exist (Ó Foghlú & Boyle, 2024; Ó Foghlú et al., 2025), they are often episodic and shaped by deadlines and institutional pressures. Policymakers face time constraints and competing priorities, while researchers operate within academic structures and goals. Within critical policy analysis, collaboration is most effective when it recognises these differing demands and encourages a shared understanding of the challenges but also the opportunities for reform. Developing joint frameworks allows both policymakers and academics to engage with evidence in ways that challenge issues such as deficit narratives or legitimise inclusive practice in mainstream education. The findings show how collaboration between researchers and policymakers is unplanned and often hampered by time pressure among policymakers and their need to meet deadlines. The paper also highlights how academics need to be more attuned to the practicalities and priorities of government. There was a focus in some interviews on the need to collaborate to 'change the narrative' of deficit models of education through developing joint conceptual frameworks between government and researchers.

Implementation

The translation of policy into practice reflects the tension between stated goals and institutional realities. The contestation between special and inclusive education places a contradiction at the heart of policy implementation in both countries explored in this paper. It appears that this is addressed in Ireland by implementing inclusive practices in parallel with special education provisions. The 'progressive realisation of inclusive education' is then addressed through the implementation of small and successful pilot projects with the aim of showing strategies that work and how much this costs. It is considered an optimum situation when these projects do not require additional budgets. In South Africa, the policy rhetoric is overwhelmingly inclusive, but strategic inclusive education interventions are few and far between, with a default to segregated provision when challenges in regular schools emerge, as well as skewed resource provisioning favouring special schools.

Conclusions

The study highlights the complex interplay between evidence, policy, and practice in inclusive education. Policy making is shaped not only by research recommendations, but also by entrenched assumptions, institutional priorities, and ideological narratives that influence what is considered legitimate knowledge. The findings show how deficit-oriented approaches result in the privileging of special education placements and demonstrate how political, social, and institutional forces mediate the uptake of research evidence. Policy makers currently seem unable to establish an understanding of inclusive education congruent with SDG 4 as being an educational strategy for all children not only

those with disabilities. This in turn perpetuates the special school debate and directs attention away from quality education for all.

The findings show that evidence-informed policy cannot be understood as a simple process of transferring research into practice. Instead, it is negotiated, contested, and embedded within wider structures of power and authority. A critical policy analysis approach informs us that knowledge is not neutral but needs to find its own legitimacy in contexts of differing ideologies in existing power structures. The analysis suggests how policy work is relational and negotiated and highlights the extent to which research evidence was embedded within broader dynamics of politics and pragmatism. The findings suggest that policymakers selectively interpret and use research evidence rather than treating it as a standalone driver of decision-making.

This paper argues for the development of an effective partnership between policymakers and academics to develop evidence informed policy around inclusive education. However, the political agenda around on the one hand, seeking to strive towards inclusive education, while on the other hand, maintaining and expanding the special education sector is the elephant in the room that needs to be addressed. The debate between these binaries has become intensely politicised and the gap between policy, research, and implementation prevents progress in providing equitable, inclusive quality education for all.

It should be recognised that this study only explores the demand side for evidence-based policy, that is the policymakers. We need to consider further what the views of academics or the supply side of research might add to this debate. Two aspects come to mind which could be further explored in future research. The first is the contribution that rigorous research methodologies, grounded within theoretical frameworks may be able to contribute to evaluating and upscaling pilot studies. Importantly, such projects need to be subject to critical scrutiny as to whether the approach adopted is the best available approach. Are there unintended consequences and what do these pilots contribute to reaching the overall aim of education for all as expressed in SDG4? This information cannot be ascertained by monitoring alone but needs an evaluative component that academic researchers are familiar with.

The second aspect supports the first as evaluation can only take place within a framework. It is therefore important that researchers and policymakers build a common vision of what education for all should look like. A conceptual framework that is jointly accepted can be an anchor for work done in this field and may help to address some of the political contestation. The findings of this paper suggest the need for interdisciplinarity, where critical perspectives of disability studies are applied to education research, policy and practice (Naraian, 2025). Using this common understanding of process, this provides education stakeholders with an opportunity to critically examine how inclusion is conceptualised and enacted going forward.

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Sources of funding