Revisiting Inclusive Education in the UAE: A Whole-School Approach of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

This report presents an analytical perspective on the evolution and current status of inclusive education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), contextualized within international movements and policies. Following the global shift from *right-based advocacy* to *school-based* needs and practices, the UAE inclusive education policy lays a solid foundation and evident readiness to reframe inclusive education reform from one that stems from the *medical model* to a whole-school framework built upon the *human capability* model. A model based on multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is proposed as a systemic, proactive, whole-school approach to promote effective and sustainable inclusive education. This internationally-informed analysis aims to highlight the status, challenges, and future-scaping of inclusive education in the UAE.

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Inclusive Education Reform in UAE Schools

Ever since the publication of the Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO,1994), most countries round the globe experienced a considerably increasing momentum in the endorsement of inclusive education (De Bruin, 2019). The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognized inclusive education as the means to address diversity and the needs of all students within the mainstream educational contexts. Article 24 of the CRPD specifically urged national policymakers to 'ensure an inclusive education system at all levels' (UN, 2006), thereby placing inclusive education at the forefront of the global education agenda. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) endorsed this movement and passed Federal Law No. 29 of 2006, as amended later by Federal Law No. 14 of 2009, which is considered the initial shift towards inclusive education in the country, emphasizing the right of students with disabilities to receive equitable access to high quality education and related services opportunities as their non-disabled peers (Badr, 2019; Gaad, 2011). The Ministry of Education's (MoE) strategy is to adapt public schools to ensure readiness to facilitate inclusive education for people with various categories of exceptionalities – referred to in the UAE as people of determination (PoD). Accordingly, PoD are entitled to enrol in any school, without exception. The Department of Special Education was first established in 2008 by the MoE to promote the rights of PoD and ensure that they have access to the same educational opportunities as students in the regular education system. The CRPD legal framework informed the UAE perspective and led to the development of the '*School for All*' initiative for the general rules that govern the integration of students with disabilities into general education classrooms (MoE, 2010). More recently, the UAE has made tangible efforts to include children with disabilities in inclusive schools as reflected in the Ministerial Resolution N. 647 for the year 2020 on the policy of inclusive education. This resolution mandates government schools to adapt and cater to the needs of students with disabilities, ensuring they receive optimal educational services and equal opportunities to the general education curriculum (The United Arab Emirates' Government Portal, 2023). The MoE has established Hemam Centers, support centers across the country managed by the PoD department, to follow up on the progress of students of determination before and after their inclusion in mainstream schools. These centers constitute a national hub for a wide range of special education support services including diagnostic assessment, providing recommendations, supporting parents, and securing related services suitable for their children (MoE, 2024).

The Shift from Right-Based Advocacy to School-Based Needs and Practices

The International Shift. The international inclusive education discussion has shifted from right-based advocacy to reform- and school-based needs for effective inclusive education and meaningful change in how students with disabilities are being educated in the general education setting (Ainscow, 2020; Alborno, 2017). Despite this international debate that spreads over the past three decades, consensus on effective ways to support students with disabilities in the inclusive educational settings remains vague. In effort to reduce the mentioned elusiveness, an emphasis on equity in inclusive education implementation was introduced in Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2015). In the *Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* (UNESCO, 2017), a group of international experts in the field of special education emphasized that *"every learner matters and matters equally"* (Ainscow, 2020). The report outlines four core teacher values that set the foundation for effective inclusive education: 1) valuing learner diversity, 2) supporting all learners, 3) collaborating with each other, and 4) engaging in life-long learning. The call was not for all teachers to become special education experts, yet, upon the four core values, teachers of inclusive classrooms can build a broad base of sophisticated expertise in effective

pedagogical practices for all learners.

Inclusive Education within the UAE Teacher Standards. Debates continue to revolve around barriers to effective inclusive education planning and implementation resulting from challenges related to school structure, resources, attitudes and teacher preparation (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Engelbrecht, Forlin, 2010; Engelbrecht et al., 2006; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Hornby, 1999; Meda et al., 2023). The focus on effective inclusive education knowledge and practices is evident in the current UAE Teacher Standards (MoE, 2024), which state that all teachers need to demonstrate knowledge of learner diversity (Performance Indicator 2.1.2.4) and apply this knowledge when planning and implementing a range of pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of all learners, including those with special educational needs (Performance Indicators 3.2.2.3 and 3.2.2.4).

UAE Teachers' Self-Reported Need for Inclusive Education Training. Although UAE schools have made notable advancements in providing students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum, teachers repeatedly described their knowledge as insufficient to teach students with disabilities in their inclusive classrooms (Alborno, 2022; Anati, 2012; Badr, 2019; Gaad, 2019; Gaad & Khan, 2007; Gaad, 2011). Studies conducted in the UAE context have shown that teachers, from their standpoint, need specialized training programs that are designed to increase their knowledge about the different categories of disabilities and ways to provide supports for students who need them (Badr, 2019; Gaad, 2011). The inclusion of PoD in the general education educational settings created greater diversity in the classrooms, yet teachers have always faced the challenge of responding to diverse needs of students within inclusive educational settings (Messiou & Ainscow 2015). With inclusion being much higher on the UAE policy agendas, there is a growing interest in exploring ways by which school practitioners can respond to diversity among their students, both on the whole-school and classroom levels. It is therefore crucial to explore in greater depth and promote effective inclusion-based planning and implementation in UAE schools.

Reframing Inclusive Education Policy: From an individualized Medical Model to a Whole-School Human Capability Reform

Practices related to the identification of students with additional learning needs and the supports provided are currently framed within a medical model deeply rooted in the *deficit theory* (Agbenyega, 2009; Sailor, 2017). This deficit-based structure encourages school systems to design, implement, and evaluate special education support practices and services in a categorical fashion (e.g., categories of needs, categorical educational placement, categories of services). The categorical assumption results in a model of service delivery that is based on individualized supplementary supports and services (Sailor et al., 2018). Grounded in the concept of 'normality', students undertake standardized tests to detect structural and persistent deficits in learning within themselves (i.e., disabilities) which will require remedial and alternative *'treatment'* interventions. From here emerges a need to reframe special education policy to shift from an individualized deficit model to a systemic whole-school reform built on the *human capability* model (Bernstein, 2000; Nussbaum, 2006). If we follow the currently prescribed special education medical model (i.e., conduct a psychometric evaluation, determine special education eligibility, individualize teaching and learning, gather evidence, monitor progress), this creates a natural pathway to masked segregation within the inclusive setting. The basis of this assumption calls for a shift away from the medical/deficit theory towards a model that relies on evaluating and refining the learning context as a whole. Examining the learning ecosystem in its entirety has a promising potential to bridge resources to support the needs of every student, with or without an exceptionality (Sailor, 2017). A

whole-school '*all hands on deck*' application of inclusive education built on the premise of human capabilities (Sailor & Roger, 2005) enables education policy makers and school practitioners to rethink inclusive education as an ecosystem beyond sharing physical space and learning resources and facilities. Based on this discussion, I propose a framework for rethinking inclusive education within education systems (see Figure 1). As illustrated in Figure 1, equitable access, at the heart of inclusive education, is not limited to physical space, yet it encompasses innovative sharing of knowledge (i.e., curricula and pedagogical practices), learning resources and facilities, as well as cultivating a social context for optimal social and emotional growth of all students. Such multifaceted accessibility occurs within a home-grown system-wide planning, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive education support programs offered in forms such as 1) special education through consultation, 2) specialized services, 3) co-teaching, and/or 4) research-informed pedagogical innovations. Exploring a variety of proactively developed delivery models of inclusive special education is warranted to fit the contextual needs of individual schools (Giangreco & Suter, 2015). Proactively built upon solid theoretical and practical grounds, the proposed framework creates a sustainable inclusive education ecosystem that carries potential to improve the quality of life for PoD and stakeholders in their community (e.g., school practitioners, peers, family members, etc.).
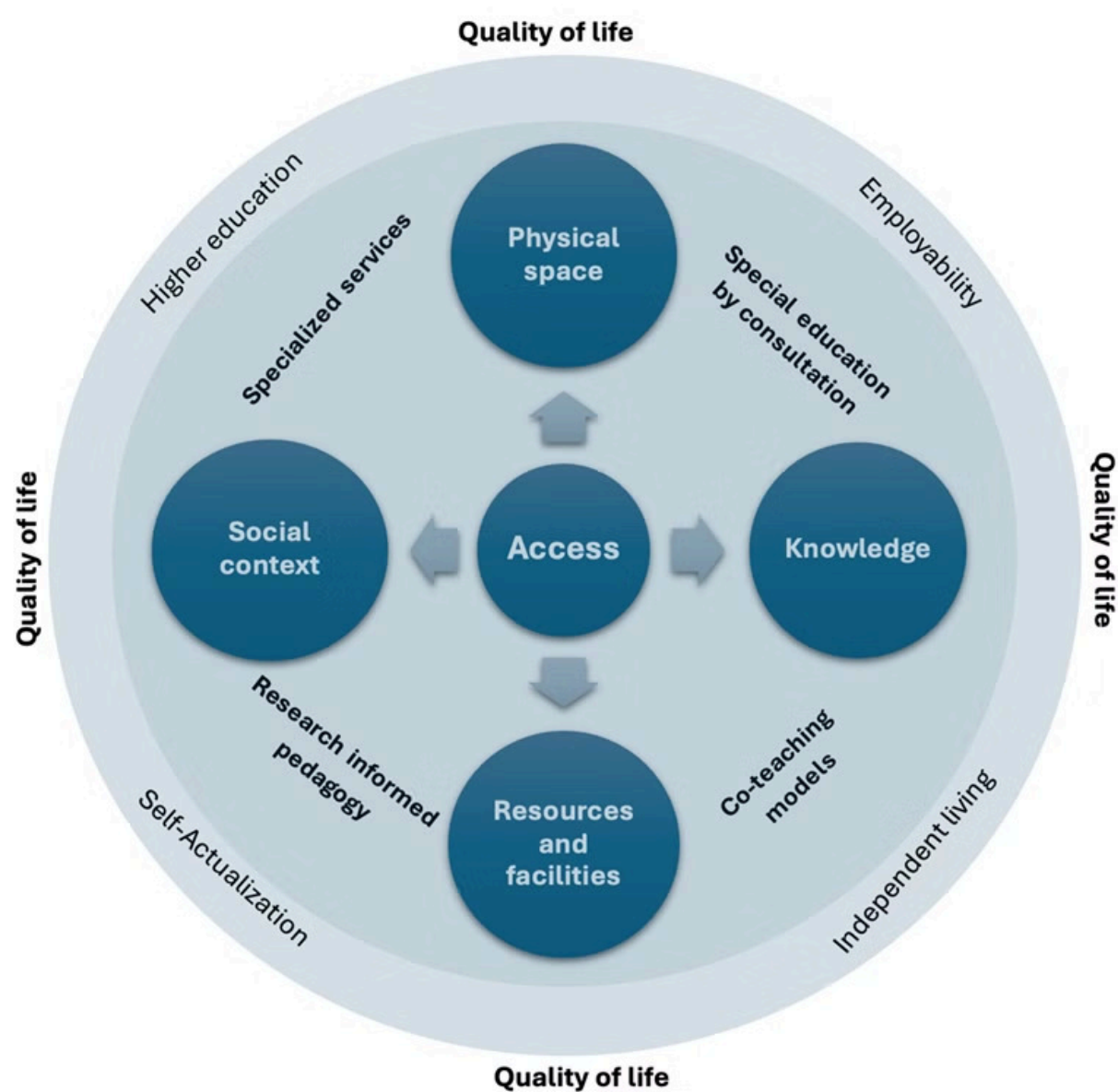

Figure 1. Inclusive education beyond sharing physical space

A Multi-Tiered System of Support: Specialized Does not Necessarily Mean Individualized

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) represent a conceptual model that aligns with the logic of human capabilities for planning, delivery, and evaluation of educational resources (Bahr et al., 2023; Sailor, 2015). Backed by a long history of empirical evidence, the theoretical framework of MTSS calls for a proactive, systems change, whole-school transformation (Gresham, 2007; Jimerson et al., 2016;Sugai & Horner, 2009). This data-driven model emphasizes implementing effective prevention practices for all students and providing more specialized support for students who do not exhibit adequate academic

and/or social-emotional progress with universal support. As shown in Figure 2, Tier 1 represents universal research-informed practices to support all students across learning environments. Within Tier 1, teachers are expected to build on a broad base of sophisticated expertise in effective pedagogical practices for all students. Students who are not adequately responsive to Tier 1 universal practices receive small-group targeted intervention within Tier 2 level of support. Systemically, students who do not demonstrate adequate progress even with targeted small-group support receive the most individualized and specialized intervention within Tier 3. The type of MTSS that focuses on academic performance is referred to as 'response to Intervention' (RTI; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012), and the type that targets social-behavioral outcomes is school-wide 'positive behavior intervention and supports' (PBIS; Horner et al., 2014; Sailor, 2017;Sugai et al., 2000).
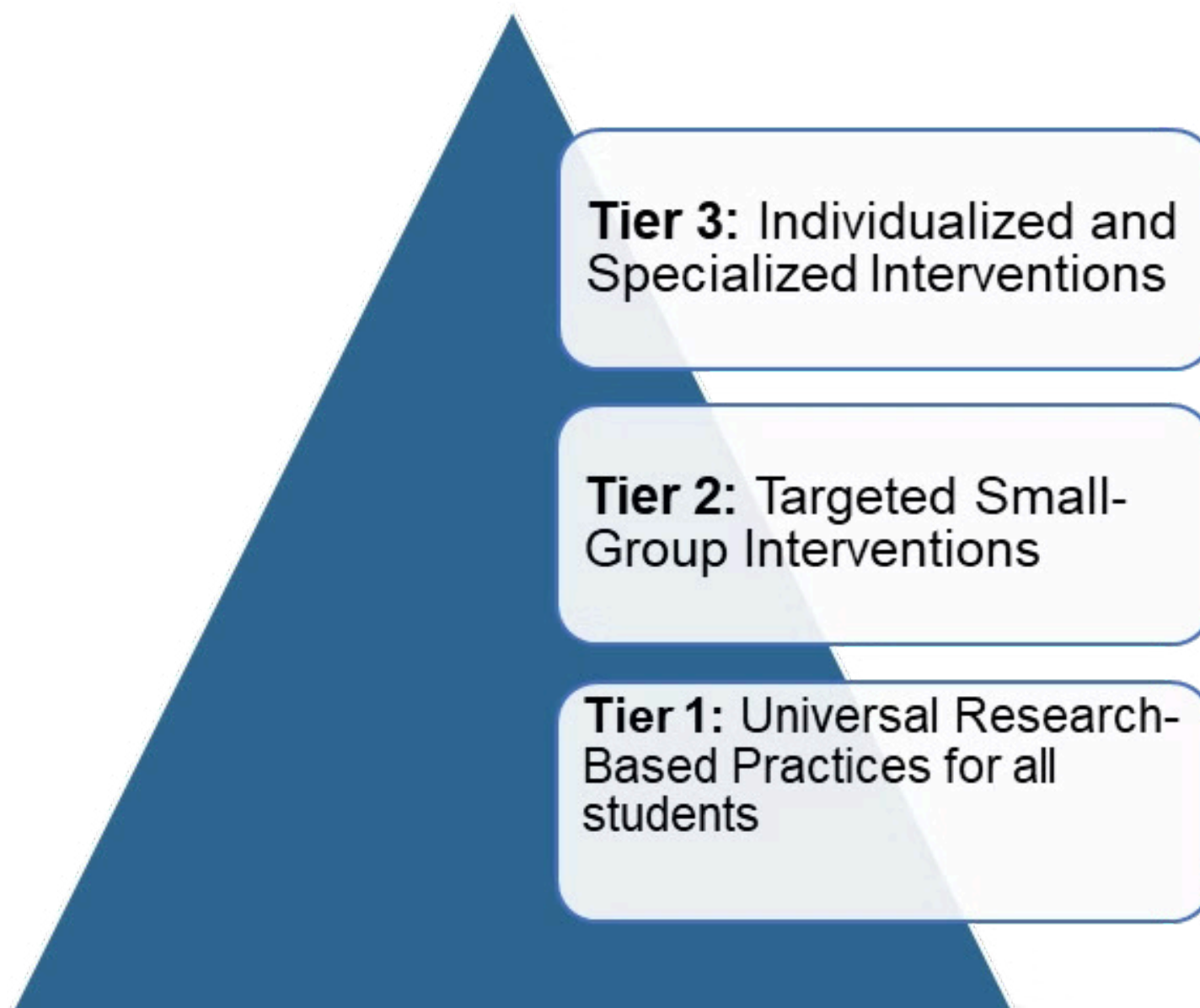
Figure 2. Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)

Final Thoughts

Successful endorsement of MTSS may sound simplistic or straight forward, yet it is critical to highlight that full favorable transformation may well take three to four years of high fidelity implementation (Sailor et al., 2018). Inclusive education frameworks such as MTSS are not a set of strategies or tools, neither are they kits or programs that school systems get their hands on. Indeed, MTSS are school-wide systemic processes that drive the transformation of a school's ecosystem to one that achieves '*School for All*' beyond sharing the physical space. District and school-level leadership that is supportive of MTSS present a fundamental pillar for consistent implementation of inclusive education mechanisms and processes. As discussed earlier in the report, MTSS is built on data-driven decision making within and across tiers. From here, extra caution must be taken when deciding what types of data to be collected and how to use these data, since '*what gets measured gets done*' (Ainscow, 2020). Data-driven decision making is a double-edged sword presenting a high risk to slip away from the *human capability* model back into the *medical model*. Overreliance on standardized diagnostic assessments for the purpose of identifying individual deficits, justifying testing accommodations, and recommending alternative

educational placements may contribute to masking a possible need for innovative teaching and learning practices on the universal level (i.e., Tier 1 of MTSS).

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