

# Advisory collaboration for inclusive education in Asia: a theoretical model grounded in the Maldivian policy and global practice

## Asesoría colaborativa para la educación inclusiva en Asia: un modelo teórico basado en la política de Maldivas y en la práctica global

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Inclusive education policies alone are insufficient without structured collaboration between classroom teachers and specialist support staff. In low-resource and small-island contexts, the absence of advisory systems often limits the sustained implementation of inclusive practices. **Objective:** This study examines advisory collaboration as a system-level support mechanism and develops a Six Pillar Model for the Maldives, drawing on global literature and national policy documents. **Method:** A conceptual model-building approach was adopted, guided by PRISMA procedures. A total of 47 international and national sources were identified, screened, and analysed using descriptive mapping and inductive thematic synthesis, following Jabareen's framework. **Results:** Six key pillars were identified: policy alignment and coherence; clearly defined advisory roles and structures; professional development and capacity building; collaborative decision-making; equitable resource allocation; and monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive feedback. These were grouped into structural enablers and functional processes. **Conclusions:** The Six Pillar Model links inclusive education policy with classroom practice by positioning advisory collaboration as a structured system component. While developed for the Maldivian context, the model may also be applicable to other small-island and low-resource education systems.

**Keywords:** Advisory collaboration; inclusive education; developing regions; school-based support; policy implementation.

### Resumen

**Introducción:** Las políticas de educación inclusiva por sí solas resultan insuficientes sin una colaboración estructurada entre los docentes de aula y el personal de apoyo especializado. En contextos de escasos recursos y pequeños estados insulares, la ausencia de sistemas de asesoramiento a menudo limita la implementación sostenida de prácticas inclusivas. **Objetivo:** Este estudio examina la colaboración de asesoría como un mecanismo de apoyo a nivel sistémico y desarrolla un Modelo de Seis Pilares para las Maldivas, fundamentado en la literatura global y documentos de política nacional. **Método:** Se adoptó un enfoque de construcción de modelo conceptual, guiado por los procedimientos PRISMA. Se identificó, cribó y analizó un total de 47 fuentes internacionales y nacionales mediante un mapeo descriptivo y una síntesis temática inductiva, siguiendo el marco de Jabareen. **Resultados:** Se identificaron seis pilares clave: alineación y coherencia de las políticas; roles y estructuras de asesoría claramente definidos; desarrollo profesional y fortalecimiento de capacidades; toma de decisiones colaborativa; asignación equitativa de recursos; y monitoreo, evaluación y retroalimentación adaptativa. Estos se agruparon en facilitadores estructurales y procesos funcionales. **Conclusiones:** El Modelo de Seis Pilares vincula la política de educación inclusiva con la práctica en el aula al posicionar la colaboración de asesoría como un componente estructurado del sistema. Si bien fue desarrollado para el contexto de las Maldivas, el modelo también puede ser aplicable a otros sistemas educativos de escasos recursos y estados insulares.

**Palabras clave:** Asesoría colaborativa; educación inclusiva; regiones en vías de desarrollo; apoyo escolar; políticas educativas.



## INTRODUCTION

International agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) have placed inclusive education high on the global agenda. These frameworks stress equal access and meaningful participation for all learners, particularly those with disabilities, within mainstream schooling (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2024). However, policy commitments alone are insufficient. In practice, schools need workable structures to support teachers in responding to diverse learning needs, especially through ongoing collaboration with specialist staff (Friend & Cook, 2016; Loreman, 2017; UNESCO, 2024).

In this study, we define advisory collaboration as structured interaction between classroom teachers and support personnel, including special educational needs teachers, inclusion coordinators, instructional coaches, and school counsellors. This may involve joint planning, in-class support, reflective discussion, and targeted professional learning. Such collaboration supports teacher confidence and strengthens the consistent use of inclusive practices in everyday classroom settings (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Friend & Cook, 2016; Adams, Hussain & Tan, 2023).

The way advisory collaboration is organised differs across contexts. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2021; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024) emphasises the role of school leadership teams as key points for coordinating planning, building capacity, and supporting inclusive decision-making. In parts of Asia, including Singapore and India, advisory roles are often embedded within teacher mentoring and school improvement processes, helping to keep support ongoing and responsive to local needs (Faragher et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2024). Across these settings, clear role definitions, regular communication, and sustained professional learning appear to be important in maintaining inclusive practice (Faragher et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2014; UNESCO, 2024).

Evidence from Southeast Asia further highlights the importance of legal clarity and inter-agency coordination. UNESCO (2021) documents these challenges, while Khairuddin & Abdul Aziz (2021) identify policy gaps that limit effective implementation, particularly where inclusive education remains more aspirational than operational. UNICEF's South Asia mapping also points to weaknesses in advisory support structures, especially within decentralised systems (Grimes & de la Cruz, 2021). Recent regional analysis further reinforces these concerns (Pathak et al., 2026). Together, these findings raise an important question: how effectively do advisory collaboration frameworks function in resource-constrained settings?

Beyond Asia and the Pacific, research from the Global South shows how advisory collaboration is organised in resource-constrained systems. In several African countries, advisory functions are often located within district- or circuit-level support structures rather than individual schools. In South Africa, for example, District-Based Support Teams and School-Based Support Teams provide pedagogical guidance, coordinate services, and support teachers in implementing inclusive practices, particularly in under-resourced schools (Department of Basic Education, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

In Ghana, inclusive education policy relies on itinerant specialists and school cluster arrangements to address shortages of trained personnel and the uneven distribution of resources (Ainscow et al., 2019).

In Latin America, advisory systems are often organized through cross-sector and school-linked support models. In Brazil, *Atendimento Educacional Especializado* (specialised educational support services) embeds advisory support within mainstream schools through resource rooms and itinerant professionals who work alongside classroom teachers on inclusive planning and differentiated instruction (Mendes & Maluf, 2016; Carrinho, 2026). In Chile, the School Integration Program formalizes advisory collaboration by linking specialised professionals with classroom teachers to support inclusive practice at the school level (OECD, 2018). These examples show how advisory collaboration adapts to contexts marked by limited funding, geographic distance, and systemic inequalities, reinforcing its relevance across the Global South.

In the Maldives, inclusive education policy has developed gradually, drawing on widely recognised principles of equity, participation, and support. The first Inclusive Education Policy (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2013) focused mainly on improving access. The 2021 revision moved further by introducing School-Based Support Teams, clarifying special educational needs roles, and encouraging collaboration across agencies (MoE, 2021a). The Special Educational Needs Guideline Framework (MoE, 2016) also outlines roles, responsibilities, and referral processes for advisory staff.

Despite these developments, implementation has not been consistent. Studies in Maldivian schools show that teachers continue to face challenges related to limited training, insufficient resources, and weak system-level support (Naseer & Hameed, 2024). Regional analyses point to similar gaps in coordination and advisory support, particularly in decentralised systems (UNICEF, 2021). These challenges are further shaped by the limited number of trained personnel, the geographic spread of schools across more than 200 inhabited islands, and the absence of a clear, unified framework to guide advisory collaboration (MoE, 2021b; UNESCO, 2024).

Recent developments indicate a continued policy focus on these issues. UNICEF (2024) reports the launch of the Education Transformation Agenda (THAIBA), which places emphasis on equity, inclusion, and strengthening the education system in the Maldives.

Many existing frameworks on inclusive education and collaboration focus on inputs, defined roles, and teacher-level practices. Less attention is given to how advisory collaboration operates as a system-level process that connects these elements in practice. Recent global reviews continue to highlight the importance of stronger system-level coordination, professional support structures, and leadership in translating inclusive policy into practice (UNESCO, 2024; UNESCO, 2026). This study examines advisory collaboration as a connecting structure linking policy intentions, professional learning, and decision-making at the school level. The Six Pillar Model proposed here explains how advisory systems operate across structural and functional levels to bridge the gap between policy and classroom practice, particularly in low-resource and geographically dispersed settings.

Key policy documents in the Maldives, including the Inclusive Education Policy (MoE, 2021a), the Special Educational Needs Guideline Framework (MoE, 2016), and the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Inclusive Education (MoE, 2021b), provide the foundation for advisory collaboration and inclusive practice. This paper brings together insights from international literature with these national policy frameworks.

Based on this synthesis, we propose a Six Pillar Conceptual Model that is grounded in theory and relevant to the Maldivian context. While developed for a small-island setting, the model may also prove useful for other low-resource education systems facing similar structural and geographic challenges. As highlighted in recent global reports by UNESCO (2024), system-level coordination and leadership play a central role in strengthening inclusive education, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

*1. What principles and structural elements underpin effective advisory collaboration in inclusive education globally?*

*2. To what extent do these globally recognised principles of advisory collaboration align with the policy frameworks and practical implementations of inclusive education in Asia, specifically in the Maldives?*

*3. How can global, Asian, and Maldivian principles of advisory collaboration be systematically synthesised to construct a contextually responsive six pillar conceptual model that advances inclusive education in Asian small-island and low-resource settings?*

## METHODOLOGY

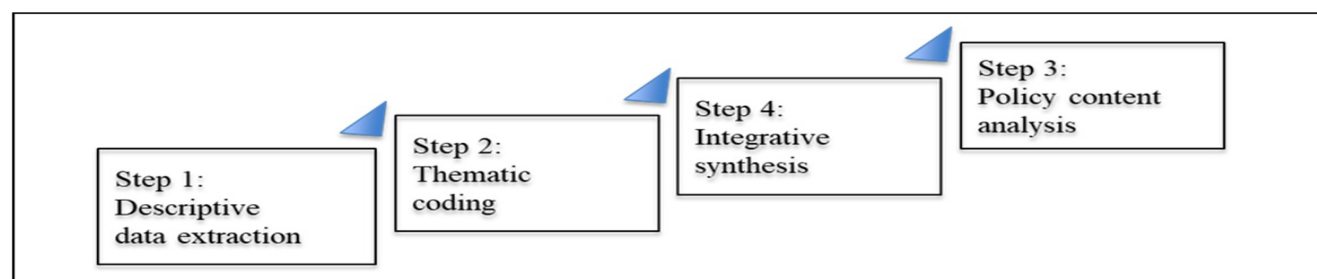
### Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual model-building approach based on Jabareen's (2009) framework, which offers a systematic way of developing conceptual models from multidisciplinary literature. This approach is consistent with established perspectives on conceptual and theoretical framing in qualitative research, as discussed by Collins & Stockton (2018) and Kivunja (2018).

The research design is organised into two interconnected components. The first is a structured literature review guided by PRISMA principles, which supports transparency and consistency across the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. As the study does not include statistical meta-analysis, it is presented as a structured review rather than a full systematic review.

The second component involves interpretive synthesis, through which the Six Pillar Model is developed using thematic coding and policy analysis. Together, these components provide a clear methodological foundation and support the development of the proposed conceptual model.

Figure 1. Conceptual Overview of the Review and Model Development Process



## Systematic Literature Review Process

### Data Sources

Three types of sources were used in this study. The first comprised peer-reviewed academic literature identified through databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. The second consisted of international policy frameworks, particularly publications from UNESCO and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. The third included key Maldivian policy documents, namely the Inclusive Education Policy (MoE, 2021a), the Special Educational Needs Guideline Framework (MoE, 2016), and the Monitoring Framework for Inclusive Education (MoE, 2021b).

### Search Strategy

The search was carried out in two stages. The first stage used broad terms to capture a wide range of literature on inclusive education and advisory collaboration. The second stage applied more focused terms to identify studies specifically related to school-based support and geographically dispersed systems.

Key terms included: *inclusive education*, *special educational needs*, *advisory collaboration*, and *school-based support teams*. Context-specific terms such as *Maldives* and *small island developing states* were also used.

To maintain consistency, a set of filters was applied. The search was limited to English-language publications published between 2010 and 2024. It focused on peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and official policy documents, with searches mainly conducted within titles and abstracts. Table 1 summarizes the search and screening process.

Table 1

PRISMA-Informed Search and Screening Summary

Resource	Results of Round 1	Results of Round 2	After Screening
ERIC (database)	4,200	95	21
Google Scholar (search engine)	14,300	123	5
JSTOR (archive)	2,000	37	3
UNESCO Repository (portal)	800	16	6
EASNIE website (agency portal)	150	11	4
MoE Maldives website	45	18	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>21,495</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>47</b>

## Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the screening process to maintain alignment with the study objectives.

Sources were included if they addressed advisory or collaborative approaches in K–12 inclusive education. Priority was given to studies focusing on school-based support teams, inclusion coordinators, instructional coaching, or similar structures. Only English-language publications produced between 2010 and 2024 were considered, including peer-reviewed articles, government policy documents, and institutional reports.

Sources were excluded if they focused primarily on higher education or vocational training. Studies based mainly on clinical or medical models of disability without clear educational relevance were also excluded, along with those lacking sufficient methodological clarity. In addition, opinion-based materials and unverified online sources were not considered.

*Table 2*

*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus on advisory or collaborative models in K–12 inclusive education	Focus on higher education or vocational training
Coverage of SBSTs, inclusion coordinators, instructional coaching	Clinical, diagnostic, or medical models of disability
English-language publications	Non-English documents
Published between 2010 and 2024	Works published prior to 2010
Peer-reviewed articles, government policies, or institutional reports	Blog posts, opinion pieces, or unverified web content

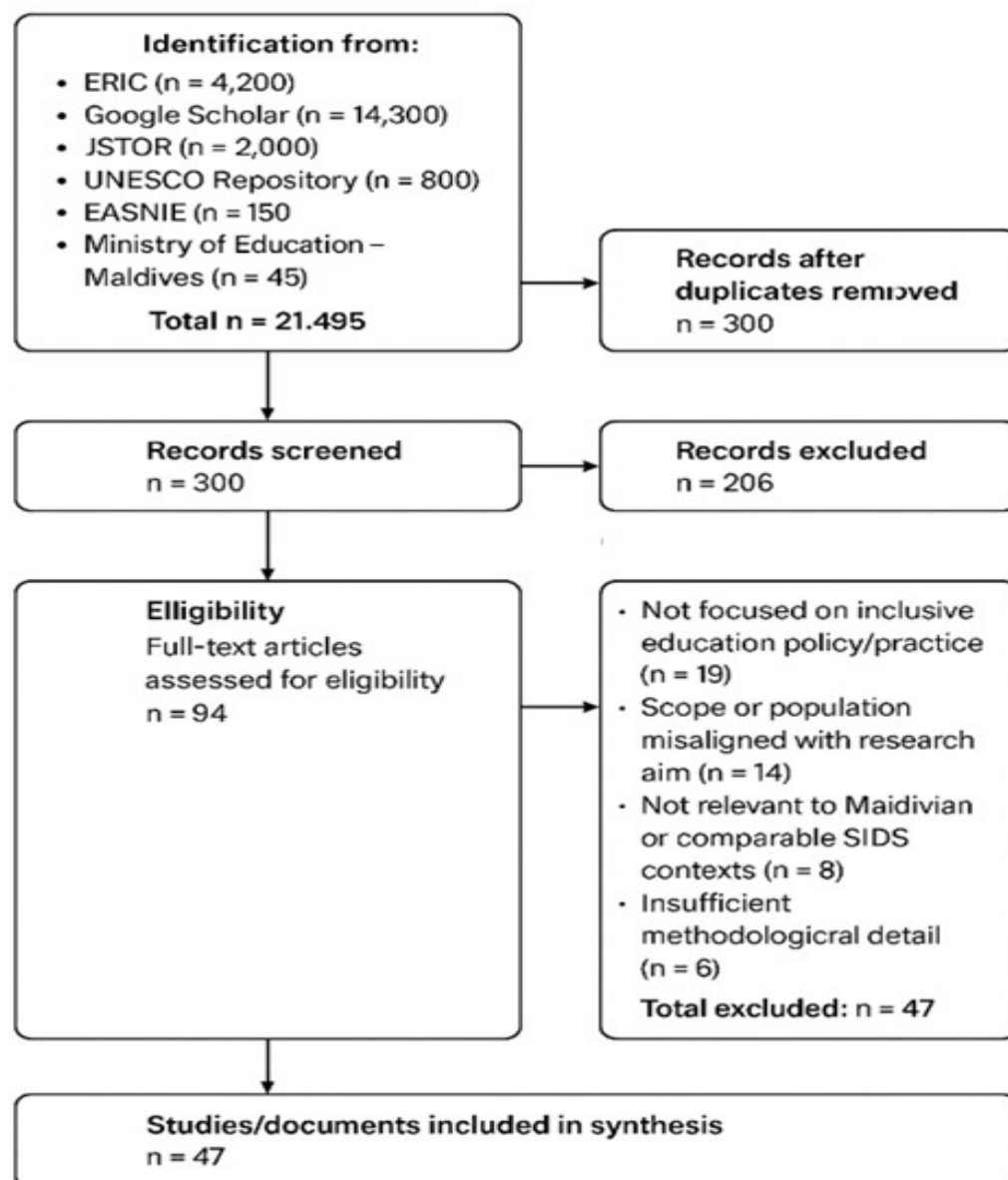
## Screening and Selection Process

The screening process followed the main stages outlined in PRISMA: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Search results from multiple databases and sources were compiled and organised in a reference sheet, allowing both automatic and manual removal of duplicate records.

Following this, titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess their relevance to the study. Articles identified as relevant were then examined in full to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria. In total, 47 sources were selected for detailed analysis.

To enhance reliability, a subset of records was reviewed independently by two researchers. Any differences in judgement were discussed until agreement was reached. [Figure 2](#) summarizes the overall selection process.

Figure 2. PRISMA-Style Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process



### Descriptive Mapping and Analytical Preparation

Following the selection process, the included sources were organised for analysis using a structured mapping approach. Key information, including publication type, research design, geographic focus, and main themes, was recorded using a standardised coding sheet.

This process supported clearer comparison across studies in different contexts and ensured transparency in the analytical procedure. The mapped data then formed the basis for the thematic analysis presented in the results section.

### Interpretive Synthesis and Model Development

After the descriptive preparation, the study moved to interpretive synthesis using Jabareen’s (2009) framework for conceptual model construction.

### Thematic Coding

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring concepts across the 47 sources. The initial stage of open coding generated categories such as policy

alignment, advisory role definition, professional development, collaborative decision-making, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms. These codes were then refined through iterative comparison and grouped into broader themes.

### **Policy Content Analysis**

Maldivian policy frameworks were analysed to identify formal role definitions, collaborative arrangements, capacity-building provisions, and monitoring structures. This allowed for a structured comparison between globally identified principles and national policy frameworks.

### **Integrative Model Construction**

Themes derived from the literature were mapped against Maldivian policy provisions to examine areas of convergence, divergence, and contextual adaptation. Consideration was given to geographic dispersion, variation in school size, and resource constraints. Through iterative synthesis, six interrelated pillars were identified and organised into structural enablers and functional processes.

Based on this process, the Six Pillar Model was developed to explain how advisory collaboration operates as a structured system linking policy direction with classroom-level practice.

## **RESULTS**

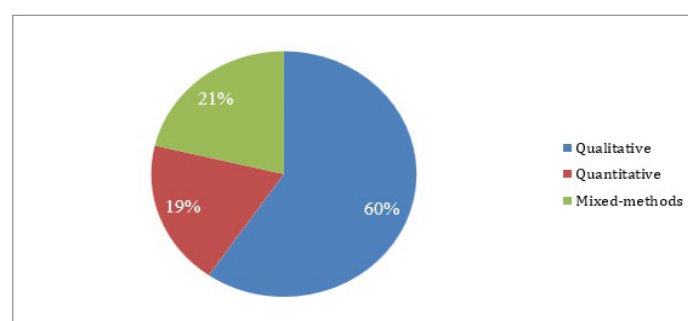
### **Descriptive Outcomes of the Review**

After the screening and selection process, 47 sources were included in the final analysis. These comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, international policy reports, Maldivian policy documents, and several conceptual and theoretical studies.

### **Methodological Distribution**

The studies included in the review reflect a range of methodological approaches. Most adopted qualitative methods, while others employed quantitative or mixed methods designs. Qualitative studies commonly drew on interviews, case studies, and thematic analysis to examine advisory structures and inclusive practices. Quantitative studies generally relied on survey data and statistical analysis, while mixed methods studies combined these approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding. **Figure 3** shows the distribution of methodological approaches across the reviewed studies.

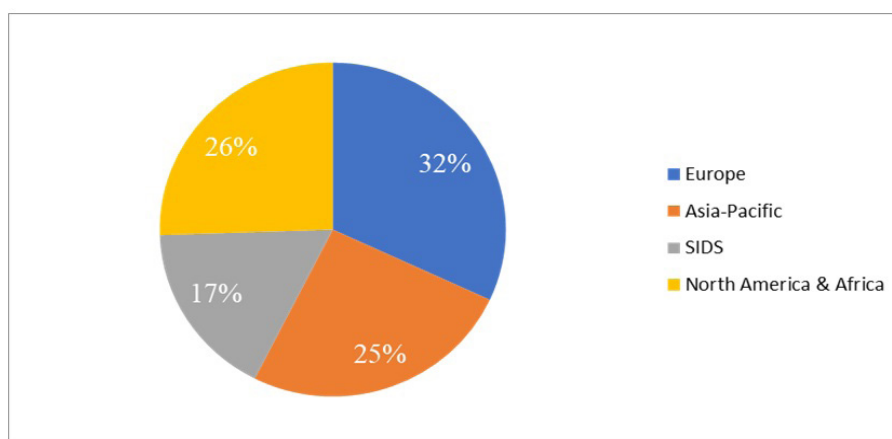
*Figure 3. Distribution of Studies by Methodology*



### Geographic Distribution

The studies reviewed covered a wide range of geographic contexts. Many were drawn from Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, while others focused on Small Island Developing States and broader Global South contexts. This distribution indicates that advisory collaboration is being examined across diverse education systems with varying levels of resources and structural conditions. Figure 4 shows the geographic distribution of the studies included in the review.

Figure 4. Geographic Distribution of Reviewed Studies



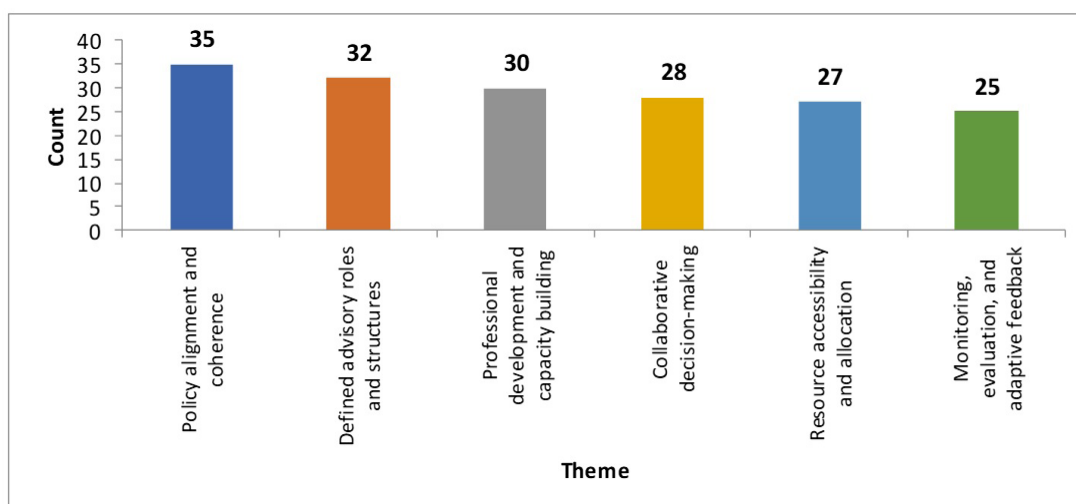
### Thematic Findings

The analysis of the selected sources identified six main thematic areas that appeared consistently across the literature.

The frequency of coded themes was as follows: policy alignment and coherence (35 occurrences; 19.8%), defined advisory roles and structures (32; 18.1%), professional development and capacity building (30; 17.0%), collaborative decision-making (28; 15.8%), monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive feedback (27; 15.3%), and resource accessibility and allocation (25; 14.1%).

Several studies contributed to more than one thematic category. Figure 5 illustrates the relative distribution of these thematic priorities.

Figure 5. Frequency of Thematic Priorities in Reviewed Sources



### **Policy Alignment Patterns in the Maldivian Context**

Analysis of Maldivian policy documents indicates formal recognition of advisory roles, including special educational needs (SEN) teachers and School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs). The Inclusive Education Policy (MoE, 2021a) and the SEN Guideline Framework (MoE, 2016) outline expectations related to collaborative planning, referral procedures, and capacity development.

The Monitoring Framework for Inclusive Education (MoE, 2021b) specifies system-level evaluation processes. Differences are evident in the level of operational detail provided across these policy instruments.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Interpreting the Thematic Architecture of Advisory Collaboration**

The findings of this study indicate that advisory collaboration extends beyond informal interaction between professionals. It can be more clearly understood as a structured component of the education system. Across different contexts, key elements such as policy alignment, clearly defined roles, professional learning, collaborative decision-making, resource allocation, and monitoring tend to occur together. This suggests that inclusive education is more likely to be sustained when these elements are coordinated rather than approached as separate classroom-level efforts. This interpretation is consistent with existing literature, which highlights the importance of institutional coherence in strengthening inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021; UNESCO, 2024; UNESCO, 2026).

Clear relationships can be observed among these elements. Where advisory roles are clearly defined, collaboration tends to be more structured and consistent. Professional development is often linked to ongoing monitoring and feedback. These patterns indicate that inclusive reform is not driven by a single factor, but by how different components operate together within the system. This aligns with perspectives from distributed leadership and inclusive pedagogy, which emphasise shared responsibility and collaboration in sustaining change (Spillane, 2006; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Donath et al., 2023; Tejeiro, 2024).

Overall, these findings clarify the structural and process-related features that support effective advisory collaboration across contexts.

### **From Thematic Convergence to the Six-Pillar Model**

The Six Pillar Model brings together the key elements identified in the analysis into a clear and connected framework. By distinguishing between structural conditions and everyday practices, it helps explain how advisory collaboration links policy intentions with what takes place in schools.

Many existing frameworks tend to focus either on policy-level commitments or on classroom practices. Less attention is given to how these levels connect in practice. The model developed in this study addresses this gap by showing how advisory collaboration can link broader system structures with day-to-day teaching.

In this way, the model explains how structural and practical elements work together to support inclusive education. It highlights that both system-wide conditions and everyday school practices are important, and that their connection is central to sustaining inclusive approaches.

Taken together, these elements respond to the second research question by showing how global principles and Maldivian policy structures can be brought into a single framework suited to island-based and resource-constrained contexts. The model also addresses the third research objective by bringing together global and national insights into a coherent six-pillar structure relevant to geographically dispersed education systems.

### **Implications for the Maldivian Context**

The Maldivian education system operates within distinct structural conditions shaped by geographic dispersion, differences in school size, and uneven access to specialist expertise. Previous studies have noted ongoing challenges in sustaining advisory support and strengthening teacher preparedness (Moosa et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021). In this context, advisory collaboration becomes particularly important in supporting more consistent implementation across islands.

Strengthening key structural enablers, especially role clarity and coherence in monitoring, can improve system consistency. At the same time, greater attention to practical processes—such as digital advisory platforms, cluster-based mentoring, and dedicated time for collaborative planning—may help reduce professional isolation among teachers. When brought together within a single framework, the Six Pillar Model offers a way to connect national policy commitments with day-to-day practice.

### **Broader Theoretical and Global South Implications**

The model also reflects patterns seen in other low-resource settings, including parts of Latin America and Africa. In these contexts, school-based support teams, district-level advisory structures, and cluster mentoring networks often function as an intermediate layer between policy and practice.

By showing how structural arrangements and everyday processes work together, the Six Pillar Model adds to ongoing discussions on system capacity in inclusive education. Rather than treating collaboration as a general idea, the model sets out the conditions through which inclusive practices can be implemented and sustained in resource-constrained education systems.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is subject to certain limitations, including its reliance on English-language sources and the absence of empirical validation of the proposed model. Although the framework is grounded in systematic synthesis, further research is needed to examine its implementation across diverse governance contexts and to assess its influence on teacher practice and learner participation. Longitudinal and mixed methods studies would strengthen understanding of how advisory collaboration evolves and how **system-level capacity** is sustained over time.

## CONCLUSION

Inclusive education depends not only on policy commitments, but also on systems that support implementation in schools. This study demonstrates that advisory collaboration plays a central role in linking policy, professional learning, and classroom practice. The analysis identified six key areas, which together form the basis of the proposed model.

The Six Pillar Model provides a framework for understanding how advisory systems operate across different levels of the education system. It emphasises the need for clear roles, sufficient resources, collaboration, and ongoing feedback to strengthen inclusive practices in schools.

Although the model is grounded in the Maldivian context, it is also relevant to other small-island and resource-constrained settings facing similar challenges. By outlining the structural and operational conditions needed for sustained advisory collaboration, the model offers both a way to analyse practice and a practical guide for improving inclusive education.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The submitted work does not represent any conflict of interest with the authors, the journal, or the publishing entity.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

**Mohamed Nasir:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Drafting of the original manuscript, Visualization.

**Aminath-Shafia Adam:** Methodology, Formal Analysis, Review, Editing of the manuscript, Supervision.

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