

Designing for Inclusion: A Literature Review on Accessible School Architecture for Children with Disabilities in Cameroon

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Abstract: More than sixty years after independence, Cameroon still enrolls only a small fraction of its children living with disabilities in school, a shortfall that is as spatial as it is social. This article presents a systematic literature review of the theoretical, normative and empirical foundations of inclusive school architecture, with specific reference to the Cameroonian context. Drawing on universal design theory, international and national accessibility frameworks, and the sociology of inclusive education, the review identifies the physical, sensory and cognitive dimensions that an accessible learning environment must address. It further develops a typology of disability and its spatial implications, and it examines four contrasted case studies, Hazelwood School in Scotland, Fuji Kindergarten in Japan, Lower Gweru Primary School in Zimbabwe, and the Louis Braille Inclusive Bilingual Primary School in Yaoundé, in order to identify design strategies that are transposable to a resource constrained African setting. The review shows that architectural inclusion does not depend on costly technology: low cost, contextually grounded solutions, combined with pedagogical and institutional support, can substantially improve the accessibility of school environments. These findings establish a conceptual and operational framework for an inclusive school architecture programme adapted to Cameroon.

Keywords: Inclusive Architecture; Universal Design; School Accessibility; Disability Typology; Inclusive Education; Cameroon; Comparative Case Study.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The built environment is one of the most powerful determinants of the quality of learning and of the wellbeing of the pupils who occupy it. This influence becomes decisive when a school must accommodate children with physical or sensory impairments, whose autonomy and participation depend heavily on the fit between their capacities and the architectural setting. In Cameroon, only about ten percent of children with disabilities are enrolled in school [1], so the design of genuinely inclusive school infrastructure represents a major challenge for the realisation of the right to education for all.

This gap is not only a matter of political will; it is also a design problem. Architecture can either reproduce exclusion, by taking the able bodied pupil as the only implicit user, or it can actively support inclusion, by treating diversity of capacity as an ordinary design condition rather than an exception to be

accommodated afterwards. The central question addressed by this review is therefore: how can school architecture be conceived to guarantee physical, sensory and cognitive accessibility for children with disabilities in Cameroon, drawing on the theoretical frameworks and international precedents available in the literature?

To answer this question, the review is organised around five complementary axes. Section II presents the conceptual foundations of inclusive architecture and universal design. Section III analyses school accessibility in its physical, sensory and cognitive dimensions, together with the international and Cameroonian regulatory framework. Section IV examines inclusive education as a systemic project and its architectural translations, including the specific situation of Cameroon. Section V proposes a typology of disability and reviews the relevant statistical evidence. Section VI compares four inclusive school facilities, three international references and one Cameroonian initiative, to identify strategies and

limits. Section VII discusses the gap between normative ambition and built reality, and Section VIII concludes.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INCLUSIVE ARCHITECTURE AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN

➤ Foundations and Evolution of the Concept

Inclusive architecture, understood as the design of built environments that are accessible to and usable by all regardless of capacity, has its roots in the civil rights movements and disability rights advocacy of the second half of the twentieth century. These movements challenged the traditional design of space around a single able bodied user type, giving rise to the concept of *universal design*, formalised in the 1980s by the American architect Ron Mace. The evolution of the concept accelerated with the adoption of binding legislative

frameworks, notably the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in the United States in 1990 [2], which inspired accessibility legislation in many countries. Over time, universal design broadened from a narrow focus on disability toward a wider understanding of human diversity, including the needs of older people, children, and anyone facing a functional limitation [3]. This shift from universal design to a genuine architecture for all reflects a paradigm change in architectural practice: the objective is no longer to comply with minimal norms or to append specialised equipment, but to rethink the design of space so that it benefits everyone naturally [4]. This approach draws on the principle formulated by the Design for All Foundation, that what is essential for ten percent of the population becomes useful for forty percent and comfortable for everyone [4], favouring shared, non stigmatising solutions that preserve the dignity of all users.



Fig 1 The Seven Principles of Universal Design Formalised by the Center for Universal Design.
Source: Pinterest, 2026

➤ Principles and Design Characteristics

In 1997, Ron Mace and his team at the Center for Universal Design formalised seven principles that continue to structure inclusive architectural practice: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and appropriate size and space for approach and use (Fig. 1). In built practice, these principles translate into concrete requirements: generous, obstacle free circulation and moderate ramp slopes for physical accessibility; modular spaces and adjustable furniture for flexibility; legible spatial organisation and multimodal signage for wayfinding; controlled thermal, acoustic and visual comfort for usability; and the use of shared, non-stigmatising solutions and noble materials that express equal respect for every user.

➤ Application to School Architecture

The school building carries specific missions, transmitting knowledge, developing competencies, and socialising children, that directly shape its architecture. For children with disabilities, it is the crucible of social inclusion and the place where the tools of autonomy are acquired. The requirements of the inclusive school unfold from the urban scale, where safe and practicable pathways must connect public roads to accessible entrances, to the scale of the building, where step free entrances, generous circulation and

appropriately sized lifts guarantee access to every room, down to the scale of the classroom, where acoustic quality, abundant natural light and adequate manoeuvring space respond to the needs of pupils with reduced mobility, hearing or visual impairments. At the scale of outdoor space, practicable playground surfaces, varied sensory atmospheres and accessible play equipment allow every child to participate fully in recreation.

III. ACCESSIBILITY IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

➤ Dimensions of School Accessibility

School accessibility refers to the capacity of an educational establishment to receive every pupil under conditions favourable to learning. It exceeds mere physical access to buildings and encompasses every condition that allows a child to benefit fully from the educational offer, and it is a precondition for the effectiveness of the right to education. The concept unfolds along three inseparable dimensions. Physical accessibility concerns the freedom and safety of movement within the school, requiring the removal of architectural obstacles and continuous, practicable pathways linking every space used by pupils. Sensory accessibility guarantees that information needed for movement and learning is perceptible to all, requiring tactile

and contrasted signage, podotactile markers, controlled reverberation, and adapted lighting. Cognitive accessibility facilitates understanding of the spatial organisation through a clear structure, logical routes, perceptible differentiation between spaces, and coherent signage. Beyond its technical dimension, school accessibility is also a legal obligation, stemming from the right to education recognised by the Cameroonian Constitution and by Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the protection of persons with disabilities [8], and a pedagogical condition, since it allows pupils to devote their energy to learning tasks rather than to overcoming obstacles.

➤ *Physical and Sensory Accessibility Devices*

Effective accessibility rests on two categories of technical devices. Physical accessibility devices ensure the continuity of the travel chain, from the school approach to the interior spaces: continuous exterior pathways wide enough for two wheelchairs to cross, step free or gently ramped entrances with graspable door handles, corridors allowing fluid circulation, and, in multi storey buildings, adequately dimensioned ramps or lifts with automatic doors and both visual and audible signalling. Sensory accessibility devices complement physical accessibility by guaranteeing the perceptibility of information: acoustic treatment of ceilings and walls to limit reverberation for hearing impaired pupils; generous, ideally bilateral natural lighting completed by uniform artificial lighting that avoids glare; and multimodal signage combining standardised pictograms, tactile braille inscriptions, sound beacons, and colour contrasts on elements such as stair nosings and glazed doors.

➤ *Regulatory Framework*

At the international level, ISO 21542, first published in 2011 and revised in 2021, provides the reference standard for accessible construction [6]. In the United States, the ADA Standards for Accessible Design have constituted the reference normative corpus since 1990 [5], while Germany applies DIN 18040 [7] and Nordic countries integrate universal design principles from the earliest design stages. These national frameworks converge toward a common core of good practice, whose effectiveness nonetheless depends on rigorous enforcement. In Cameroon, Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 establishes the principle of accessibility for buildings open to the public [8], a principle later reiterated by the 2013 interministerial circular letter on the accessibility of persons with disabilities in public establishments, which conditions building permits on compliance with accessibility requirements and refers to the practical accessibility guide published by the Ministry of Social Affairs. This regulatory architecture nonetheless remains largely declarative in the absence of detailed technical prescriptions and of consistent enforcement mechanisms.

IV. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND ARCHITECTURAL IMPLICATIONS

➤ *Foundations and Evolution*

Inclusive education is an educational approach aimed at transforming teaching systems so that all children can learn together, regardless of their differences. UNESCO defines it

as a process that addresses and responds to the diversity of the needs of all learners through increased participation in learning, culture and community life [9]. This definition underlines that inclusion is not limited to physical access to school but encompasses effective participation in every aspect of school life. The 1994 Salamanca Statement was the first milestone, affirming that ordinary schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes [10]. This principle was reinforced by the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which established the binding legal basis of a right to education without discrimination [11], and more recently by Sustainable Development Goal 4, whose target 4.a specifically calls for the construction of school facilities adapted to persons with disabilities [12], conferring on architecture an operational role in achieving these inclusive ambitions.

➤ *Pedagogical Principles and Spatial Translations*

Universal welcome requires a single accessible entrance without segregated devices and undifferentiated common spaces, avoiding any visible stigmatisation through special routes or conspicuous equipment [13][14]. Pedagogical differentiation requires flexible spaces: adjacent multipurpose rooms for small group work, movable partitions, and alcoves offering concentration without exclusion [15]. Cooperative learning requires spaces that facilitate work in clusters, with regroupable tables and generous circulation, informal meeting zones, and accessible display surfaces [16], while the adoption of inclusive practice by teachers requires structured institutional support and a genuinely inclusive school culture [17]. Finally, the diversity of pupil profiles calls for a variety of atmospheres, from calm, dimly lit zones for hypersensitive children to bright spaces for dynamic activities and withdrawal spaces enabling self-regulation.

➤ *Stakeholders, Programme, and the Cameroonian Case*

Implementing inclusive education mobilises multiple actors whose functions generate specific spatial needs: teaching teams require shared preparation rooms and confidential consultation spaces; families require welcoming reception areas and private meeting rooms; external health professionals require equipped rehabilitation rooms with independent access; and pupils require accessible individual storage and a building scale that avoids overwhelming, oversized spaces. The synthesis of these needs produces an architectural programme broader than that of the traditional school, encompassing flexible teaching spaces, support and withdrawal rooms, collaboration spaces for multidisciplinary teams, and outdoor spaces offering continuity between indoor and outdoor activity.

Cameroon has progressively engaged in a dynamic of inclusive education through legal instruments and institutional initiatives. The legal framework rests on Law No. 2010/002 and its 2018 implementing decree, and the country ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in December 2021. The National Inclusive Education Policy 2024-2028, adopted in October 2024, formalises these orientations with a projected budget of 100 billion FCFA, aiming to enrol at least twenty five percent of persons with

specific needs by 2028 through the transformation of more than 1,200 schools [18]. Within this framework, the National Centre for the Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities (CNRPH), created in 1971, provides comprehensive care including an inclusive primary school and medico-technical services [19], while civil society organisations such as the Specialised School for Deaf Children (ESEDA), created in 1972 [20], and the Sightsavers programme, which supports seven experimental schools through teacher training and adapted didactic material [21], complement the public offer. Persistent obstacles nonetheless limit effectiveness: cultural stigmatisation and insufficient teacher training constrain enrolment [22], the absence of binding technical accessibility norms leaves most school buildings inaccessible, a pattern also documented across all levels of education in other developing contexts [23], and budgetary constraints remain severe, with a Sightsavers and Ministry of Basic Education study estimating the cost of the 2017-2020 pilot programme at 300.5 million FCFA over four years for four schools, and the extension to 428 public primary schools at 27.8 billion FCFA over the 2022-2030 period [21].

➤ Disability and Specific Needs

• Conceptual Approaches and Statistical Overview

Disability is a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the interaction between a health condition and environmental factors [24]. The Cameroonian law defines a person with disability as anyone unable to independently secure the necessities of a normal individual or social life owing to a physical or mental impairment [8]. Three conceptual approaches structure the understanding of disability and its architectural translation: the medical model, which treats disability as an intrinsic characteristic requiring therapeutic intervention to reduce functional limitation; the social model, developed from the 1970s, which locates disability not in individual impairment but in the maladjustment of the physical environment, social attitudes and institutional systems; and the integrative approach. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, adopted by the World Health Organization in 2001, synthesises the medical and social perspectives by recognising three interdependent dimensions, impairment, activity limitation, and participation restriction, and it highlights the determining role of the physical built environment [25]. Globally, about 1.3 billion people, or sixteen percent of the world population, live with a significant form of disability [26], and UNICEF estimates that some 240 million children live with a disability worldwide [27], with children with disabilities forty nine percent less likely to have ever attended school than their non-disabled peers [27] (Fig. 2). In Cameroon, whose population is estimated at 29.9 million inhabitants in 2025, forty two percent of whom are under fifteen years old [28], the Ministry of Social Affairs estimates that close to 3,487,200 people, about twelve percent of the population, live with a disability [29], while the 2005 general population census recorded a prevalence of 1.5 percent, with hearing impairments (38.8 percent) and lower limb motor impairments (15.0 percent) the most frequent categories [30].

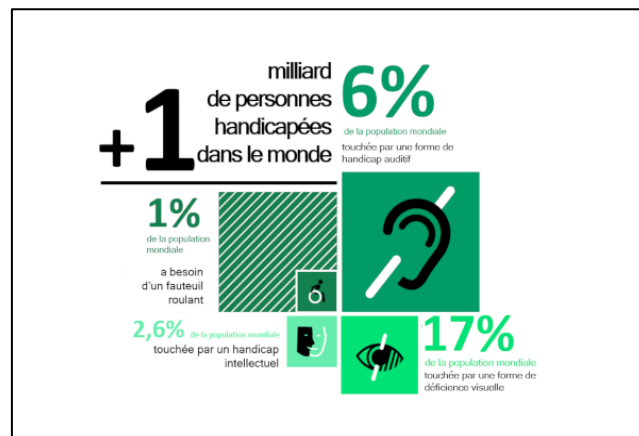


Fig 2 Selected Global Statistics on Disability and Access to Education.

Source : OMS, 2026

• Typology of Impairments and Social Attitudes

Impairments relevant to school design fall into several categories. Motor impairments affect mobility and manipulation, ranging from gait disorders requiring technical aids to permanent wheelchair use, and they primarily affect access to buildings, circulation, and the handling of pedagogical material. Visual impairments, ranging from low vision to blindness, affect reading, writing and spatial orientation, requiring visual adaptations such as magnification and contrast for low vision pupils and braille, audio and tactile supports for blind pupils. Hearing impairments, ranging from partial hearing loss to deafness, primarily affect oral communication and language acquisition, and depend heavily on acoustic quality and visibility between interlocutors. Intellectual and cognitive impairments require individualised pacing and a structured environment that facilitates understanding of expectations, while autism spectrum conditions are frequently associated with heightened sensory sensitivity and benefit from predictable routines, structured spaces, and the possibility of temporary withdrawal. Multiple disability, combining at least one intellectual and one motor impairment, requires simultaneous adaptation of multiple aspects of the environment. Beyond these technical categories, persons with disabilities in Cameroon confront exclusion rooted in cultural beliefs that associate impairment with mystical causes, and overprotective family attitudes that, despite benevolent intent, hinder the development of autonomy, underlining that awareness raising is as necessary as physical adaptation. Several civil society organisations play a central role in advocacy, awareness raising, and the improvement of architectural accessibility across the country: the National Federation of the Disabled of Cameroon (FENAHAM) coordinates advocacy nationally for the effective application of disability rights legislation; ANOPHAC, a network of seventy eight member associations and seven partner organisations, has driven the ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; PROMHANDICAM, founded in 1975, pioneered an inclusive nursery and primary school in 1977 and operates a braille press and an assistive mobility device workshop; the CNRPH, created in 1971, combines an inclusive primary school with medico-technical and

orthopaedic appliance services; and the Solidarity of Persons with Disabilities for Development (SOPHAD), founded in 2002 and grouping seventeen member associations, undertakes capacity building and advocacy.

➤ *Comparative Analysis of Inclusive School Case Studies*

The analysis of four school facilities allows the identification of proven architectural and pedagogical solutions for inclusive education. These examples illustrate contrasted approaches, from technical excellence for severe multiple disability to universal inclusive architecture and a pragmatic model in a resource constrained African context.

• *Hazelwood School, Glasgow, Scotland*

Designed by Alan Dunlop and completed in 2007, Hazelwood School accommodates sixty pupils aged two to eighteen with multiple sensory impairments [31]. Its single storey building combines natural materials of marked tactile, olfactory and visual quality, laminated timber structure, Siberian larch cladding, and recycled slate, chosen for their sensory properties [32] (Fig. 3). Orientation relies on a cork clad sensory wall with a handrail whose form varies by segment, complemented by five distinct wall textures and contrasted floor finishes that create perceptible transitions [33]. The building received the WAN Education Award 2009 and was ranked among the five best twenty first century schools by Architectural Record [34]. Its very high budget and sophisticated technologies make direct replication in Cameroon difficult, yet several principles remain transposable at low cost: multisensory design using local materials with varied textures, simplification of spatial organisation, and continuity between interior and exterior spaces, which is already consistent with Cameroonian architectural traditions.



Fig. 3. Hazelwood School, Glasgow, Exterior View Showing the Natural Material Palette.

Source : OMS, 2026

• *Fuji Kindergarten, Tokyo, Japan*

Designed by Tezuka Architects and completed in 2007, Fuji Kindergarten accommodates 600 children aged two to six following the Montessori pedagogy, within a continuous oval building 183 metres in perimeter and free of interior walls [35] (Fig. 4). This configuration eliminates spatial hierarchy and segregation between pupils; furniture rather than fixed walls gently compartmentalises the open interior, and an accessible

rooftop functions as the principal recreation area. The project won the 2017 Moriama RAIC International Prize and was designated Best of All in the OECD Compendium of Exemplary Educational Facilities [36]. Its four million Canadian dollar budget and the sophisticated engineering required for the rooftop structure exceed the resources available to Cameroonian public schools, and its open plan climate strategy assumes a temperate climate impractical under heavy tropical rainfall. Transposable lessons nonetheless include the principle of non-hierarchical architecture creating natural equality at moderate cost, the use of modular furniture instead of fixed partitions, and the integration of existing trees as structuring elements.



Fig 4 Fuji Kindergarten, Tokyo, Aerial View of the Continuous Oval Plan.

Source: Ideas.Ted.com, 2026

• *Lower Gweru Primary School, Zimbabwe*

Located in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe, Lower Gweru Primary School belongs to the national network of 470 resource units implementing the inclusive education policy adopted under the 2020 Education Act, and it has been described by UNICEF as a dream school for inclusive education [37] (Fig. 5). Pupils with visual, hearing, physical and intellectual impairments follow lessons in regular classrooms alongside their peers while receiving individualised specialised support, avoiding spatial segregation while guaranteeing targeted assistance. Between 2022 and 2023, some 77,000 children with disabilities received assistive devices, braille material, hearing aids, and mobility equipment through a partnership between the Zimbabwean government, UNICEF and the Global Partnership for Education [38]. The school illustrates an infrastructure adapted progressively rather than designed from the outset for inclusion, which generates partial accessibility and architectural compromises; despite the network of 470 units, only about ten percent of Zimbabwean children with disabilities access education, revealing the limits of a model dependent on existing infrastructure. Its pragmatic, low-cost approach, exploiting locally available resources rather than sophisticated technical solutions, nonetheless offers a directly relevant precedent for the Cameroonian context.



Fig 5 Classroom at Lower Gweru Primary School, Zimbabwe.

Source: Unicef.org, 2026

- *Louis Braille Inclusive Bilingual Primary School, Yaoundé*

The Louis Braille Inclusive Bilingual Primary School, located in Ekié, Yaoundé, is the flagship educational initiative of the Club des Jeunes Aveugles Réhabilités du Cameroun (CJARC), founded in 1988 and registered as an NGO in 2013 [39] (Fig. 6). Created in 2003 and opened in 2004 with fifty pupils, it now accommodates children with visual, hearing, physical and intellectual impairments alongside their sighted and non-disabled peers, following a model of inclusion through cohabitation in which pupils with special needs and their peers share the same classes and activities [41], with the achievements of pupils with disabilities publicly valued by teachers [42]. Adaptations include colour contrasted floor and wall finishes, continuous handrails, braille signage, and pictograms, and the affiliated ENIEG teacher training institute has trained 82 specialised teachers since 2019 [40]. As with Lower Gweru, infrastructure adapted after the fact cannot reach the accessibility level of a building conceived from inception, and dependence on donations and the exclusive location in Yaoundé fragilise sustainability and perpetuate territorial inequality. The school nonetheless demonstrates that immediate, even imperfect inclusion, combined with continuous low-cost teacher training, can compensate partially for infrastructural shortfalls, and that this evening-course training model deserves national replication.

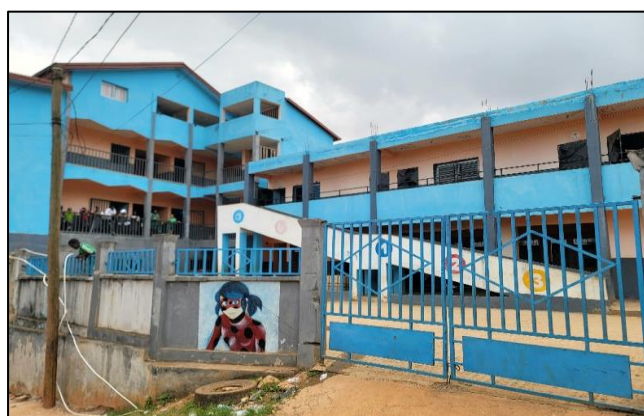


Fig 6 Louis Braille Inclusive Bilingual Primary School, CJARC, Yaoundé.

Source : Author, 2026

V. DISCUSSIONS

The reviewed literature reveals a persistent gap between normative ambition and operational reality. International and Cameroonian legal instruments consistently affirm the right of children with disabilities to an accessible education, yet the absence of binding technical prescriptions, combined with limited budgets and weak enforcement, leaves the large majority of Cameroonian school buildings inaccessible. The comparative analysis nonetheless shows that architectural inclusion does not necessarily require the costly technological sophistication of Hazelwood School or Fuji Kindergarten. The Zimbabwean and Cameroonian cases demonstrate that pragmatic, incremental adaptation combined with teacher training can generate meaningful inclusion even under severe resource constraints, although such retrofitted solutions cannot match the accessibility achieved by buildings designed for inclusion from the outset. This finding is significant for the Cameroonian context: rather than waiting for infrastructural conditions comparable to high income countries, the literature suggests that a school conceived from the initial design stage around universal design principles, using local materials and multisensory strategies, can achieve a level of inclusion superior to that of retrofitted facilities, without requiring the budgets associated with the Scottish or Japanese precedents. This conceptual and empirical framework establishes the basis on which subsequent design methodology can be developed for an inclusive school architecture programme adapted to the Cameroonian context.

VI. CONCLUSION

This review has established the theoretical, normative and comparative foundations of inclusive school architecture with specific application to Cameroon. The analysis of historical, legal and sociological frameworks reveals a persistent gap between normative ambition and operational reality, as access to inclusive education remains largely insufficient. The typology of disabilities identified the specific spatial needs of each category of pupil, while the principles of universal accessibility and multisensory design provide concrete operational guidelines. The comparative analysis of four establishments demonstrates that inclusion does not necessarily require costly technology: low-tech solutions adapted to local contexts can generate profoundly inclusive spaces. Cameroonian initiatives, although confronted with major structural constraints, accomplish remarkable work that reveals the gap between declarations of principle and the resources actually allocated. This theoretical framework constitutes the foundation from which a methodology of inclusive architectural design adapted to the Cameroonian context can be developed, operationalising the identified principles into an applicable technical reference framework for the design of future inclusive school facilities.

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