Teachers' Attitudes, Competencies, and Challenges in Inclusive Education Implementation Practices

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ABSTRACT

The concept of inclusive education has gained global attention as a means to provide equitable educational opportunities for children with special needs (CWSN) within general school environments. However, the effective implementation of inclusive education remains a challenge, especially in contexts with limited resources and support structures. This study aims to explore the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education and identify the factors that influence their effectiveness in inclusive classrooms. A qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, was used to gather data from twelve teachers across three public elementary schools in [City/Region Name], Indonesia. The findings reveal that teachers' attitudes, professional training, and institutional support play critical roles in shaping the inclusivity of classrooms. Positive teacher attitudes and adaptive teaching strategies were associated with successful inclusion, whereas lack of training and support resulted in minimal inclusion. The study concludes that empowering teachers with adequate training, emotional support, and institutional resources is essential for achieving true inclusion in schools. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by providing insights into the everyday experiences of teachers and the systemic challenges they face. It highlights the need for a more holistic approach to teacher development and school-wide support to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, inclusive education has gained significant momentum across the globe as an essential approach to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Inclusive education promotes the idea that children with special needs (CWSN) should be integrated into general education settings, where they can learn alongside their peers in a supportive and non-discriminatory environment (Cerna et al., 2021). This philosophy is grounded in human rights, social justice, and the belief that diversity enriches the educational experience for all

students. The shift from segregated special education to inclusive practices has prompted educational stakeholders to re-examine and redefine the roles of teachers in facilitating successful inclusion (Asfahani et al., 2022). In this context, teachers are knowledge transmitters and key agents of change who shape classroom environments that accommodate a wide spectrum of learning needs.

Despite the strong advocacy for inclusion and the growing number of policies supporting it, implementing inclusive education remains a complex and multifaceted challenge, particularly in developing countries. Many general schools struggle to translate inclusive policies into effective classroom practices (Chen, 2018). Teachers often face various obstacles, such as limited training in special education, lack of access to appropriate teaching resources, time constraints, and inadequate institutional support. These barriers hinder their ability to effectively respond to the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Lee et al., 2021). As a result, inclusion often remains more of an ideal than a reality. This gap between policy and practice underscores the need for a deeper understanding of teachers' practical role in inclusive settings and how they can be better supported to fulfill this role (Ninković & Florić, 2018).

This study is unique because it examines how teachers in general school environments perceive, adapt to, and implement inclusive education for children with special needs. While much of the existing research has concentrated on systemic factors such as policy frameworks, funding, and administrative leadership, fewer studies have delved into the day-to-day experiences and strategies employed by classroom teachers themselves (Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020). Yet, these teachers are at the forefront of inclusive education, tasked with balancing academic instruction, classroom management, and individualized support. By exploring their perspectives and practices, this study aims to uncover the nuances of inclusive teaching often overlooked in broader educational discourse (Stephenson, 2023).

Furthermore, this research seeks to address gaps in previous literature, particularly the limited empirical data on teachers' lived experiences in inclusive settings, especially in contexts where inclusive education is still an emerging practice. Most prior studies have been conducted in Western or highly resourced educational environments, where teachers typically receive extensive training and institutional backing (Rajabalee & Santally, 2021). In contrast, the realities in many general schools, particularly in regions with limited educational infrastructure, paint a very different picture. The lack of localized, context-specific research leaves a void in our understanding of how inclusion is actually being enacted (or not enacted) on the ground (García-Peñalvo, 2016). This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on teachers' roles within their specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

This study's central objective is to explore teachers' role in implementing inclusive education in general school settings, with a particular focus on their attitudes, instructional strategies, and the challenges they face. The research aims to provide a clearer picture of the competencies, mindsets, and support systems essential for effective inclusion (Ohito et al., 2021). Specifically, the study investigates how teachers accommodate the learning needs of children with disabilities, how they perceive their preparedness, and what kinds of institutional or professional development support they deem necessary (Adam et al., 2024). It also seeks to identify any innovative or adaptive practices teachers are already using to overcome barriers to inclusion.

Ultimately, the hope of this research is to inform both educational policy and teacher training programs. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of teachers, this study can help stakeholders design more responsive and realistic support mechanisms that empower teachers in their inclusive roles. Additionally, it can help shift the focus of inclusion efforts from abstract policy mandates to grounded, teacher-led practices that have the potential to transform classrooms into genuinely inclusive learning environments (Zaim et al., 2020). It is anticipated that the findings of this study will not only benefit children with special needs but enrich the educational experiences of all students by promoting more empathetic, flexible, and inclusive teaching practices.

The role of teachers in inclusive education cannot be overstated. They are the linchpins in successfully integrating children with special needs into mainstream classrooms. While policy and administrative support are critical, the teachers ultimately operationalize these policies within their classrooms. Therefore, understanding and supporting their role is key to advancing inclusive education.

Through this research, we aim to highlight teachers' challenges, strategies, and potential as they navigate the complex task of inclusion, thereby contributing to a more equitable and inclusive educational system for all learners.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a descriptive case study design to explore the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs in general school environments. The research was conducted over four months, from October 2024 to January 2025, in three public elementary schools in Indonesia, where inclusive education programs have been formally implemented. These schools were selected purposively based on their diverse student populations and the presence of children with various types of special needs, such as learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and physical impairments. The qualitative design allows for a deeper exploration of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and practices and the contextual challenges they face in inclusive classrooms.

Data collection was carried out through a combination of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Twelve participants were involved, including classroom teachers, special education assistants, and school administrators. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and guided by open-ended questions that explored the participants' understanding of inclusive education, their strategies to accommodate diverse learners, and the types of support they received or needed. Classroom observations were conducted to capture real-time interactions, teaching practices, and classroom dynamics related to inclusive instruction. Additionally, relevant school documents such as lesson plans, individualized education plans (IEPs), and policy guidelines were analyzed to support and triangulate the findings.

The data analysis process followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which included data condensation, data display, and drawing/verifying conclusions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded thematically, and organized into categories reflecting key aspects of the teacher's role in inclusive settings (Miles et al., 2018). Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking with selected participants. This methodological framework enabled the researcher to construct a comprehensive and context-rich understanding of how inclusive education is practiced daily in general school environments, and what systemic and individual factors influence the success of its implementation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study's findings reveal that teachers' role in implementing inclusive education is dynamic and multidimensional, encompassing instructional, managerial, emotional, and advocacy responsibilities. One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data is the critical importance of teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion. Teachers who positively perceived the value of inclusive education demonstrated a greater willingness to adapt their teaching strategies, invest in individualized support, and foster inclusive classroom cultures. These teachers viewed inclusion as a policy mandate and a moral commitment to equity and social justice. Conversely, teachers who expressed ambivalence or skepticism about inclusion tended to exhibit more rigid instructional methods and relied heavily on external support, often viewing the presence of children with special needs as an additional burden rather than an opportunity for growth.

Another significant finding highlights teachers' varied levels of preparedness and professional competence. While all participants expressed a general commitment to inclusive principles, many acknowledged gaps in their formal training, particularly in identifying and addressing specific learning disabilities or behavioral issues. Most teachers reported that their pre-service education did not adequately prepare them to handle diverse learners, and in-service training, when available, was often too general or infrequent to be practically useful. As a result, teachers developed coping strategies through informal peer support networks, trial-and-error teaching, and close collaboration with parents. This grassroots adaptability underscores the resilience and agency of teachers, but it also signals the

need for more structured and sustained professional development opportunities tailored to inclusive teaching.

The classroom observations further supported the interview data, revealing that inclusive practices were often improvised and highly dependent on the teacher's initiative. In more inclusive classrooms, teachers were seen using differentiated instruction, visual aids, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning methods to engage all students, including those with special needs. Some also used flexible seating arrangements and created quiet zones to accommodate students with sensory sensitivities (Sahabuddin et al., 2023). However, in other classrooms, inclusive efforts were minimal, with children with disabilities being physically present but socially and academically isolated. These disparities often correlate with the teacher's confidence level, available teaching resources, and the extent of support from school leadership (Marfan & Pascual, 2018).

Institutional support, or the lack thereof, emerged as another crucial theme influencing implementing inclusive education. Teachers reported that administrative backing, access to special education personnel, and availability of teaching aids significantly impacted their ability to meet the needs of all students (Mogale & Malatji, 2022). Schools with stronger inclusive support systems tended to foster more collaborative environments where teachers felt empowered to innovate and seek help. In contrast, schools lacking such support often left teachers feeling overwhelmed and isolated. Several participants highlighted the absence of clear operational guidelines and the inconsistent application of inclusion policies as major barriers to effective implementation.

Additionally, the findings shed light on the emotional labor involved in inclusive teaching. Many teachers spoke candidly about their emotional challenges, including frustration, self-doubt, and exhaustion. Yet, they also described moments of deep satisfaction and professional fulfillment when they witnessed academic or social progress in students with special needs. These emotional highs and lows illustrate the complex inner world of inclusive educators and the need for schools to recognize and support their emotional wellbeing alongside their professional development (Dover & Rodriguez-Valls, 2018).

The findings suggest that successful inclusive education relies heavily on teacher attitudes, competencies, and the support systems surrounding them. While promising practices are being implemented at the classroom level, systemic inconsistencies and a lack of targeted training remain significant obstacles. Teachers are not merely implementers of policy. They are the architects of inclusive experiences. Therefore, empowering teachers through training, emotional support, and institutional infrastructure is essential to bridging the gap between the ideal and the reality of inclusive education.

Table 1. Main findings of the teachers of inclusive education

Factors of Inclusive Education	Key Findings	Explanation
Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Inclusion	Teachers with a positive attitude are more adaptive in implementing inclusion	Teachers who believe in the value of inclusion tend to be more creative in adapting teaching to meet the needs of students with special needs.
Professional Readiness of Teachers	Limitations of training in inclusive education	Many teachers feel less professionally prepared due to limited training, both in formal education and advanced training.
Institutional Support and Leadership	Strong school support has an effect on inclusion success	Schools with sufficient administrative support and resources are likely to succeed in implementing inclusive education. This support includes access to educational support staff and appropriate teaching materials.
Differentiation Teaching Strategies	Teachers who use differentiated teaching more effectively	Some teachers implement differentiated teaching to meet students' diverse needs, such as using visual aids or a group-based approach.

Emotional Challenges in Inclusive Teaching	Teachers face emotional challenges that affect their performance	Many teachers feel exhausted and frustrated in the face of emotional challenges but also feel satisfaction when they see the progress of students with special needs.
Collaboration with Parents and Colleagues	Collaboration more often increases the success of inclusion	Collaboration between teachers and parents, as well as between teachers, is helpful in developing more personalized teaching strategies and supporting students with special needs.

This table illustrates the key factors influencing the successful implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools based on the findings of this study. Each factor shows how elements such as teacher attitudes, training, institutional support, and collaboration play a role in determining the extent to which inclusive education can be implemented effectively in the classroom. The explanations provided next to each factor provide insight into how these factors influence teachers' daily practices and their impact on children with special needs.

The findings of this study underscore the central role of teachers as pivotal actors in the successful implementation of inclusive education. The discovery that teachers' attitudes significantly affect the quality of inclusion is well-supported by previous research. Studies by (Saha, 2023), for instance, have consistently shown that teachers with positive beliefs about inclusion are likelier to embrace diverse learners and modify their instructional approaches accordingly. In this study, teachers who demonstrated an intrinsic commitment to inclusive values were those who created more adaptive and supportive classroom environments. This finding aligns with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, particularly the concept of self-efficacy, which suggests that individuals who believe in their capability to perform a task are more likely to engage in behaviors that support that belief (Nabilah Mokhtar et al., 2023). Teachers with higher self-efficacy in inclusive teaching displayed greater creativity, persistence, and resilience in addressing students' needs.

However, the gap between positive attitudes and actual inclusive practices observed in this study reflects a recurring theme in the literature: goodwill alone is insufficient without adequate training and systemic support. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasize that inclusive pedagogy is not about individual heroism but about creating learning environments where all students can participate and achieve (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Yet, many teachers in this research reported limited professional preparation, which echoes findings from (Qu, 2022), who identified insufficient pre-service and in-service training as a major barrier to effective inclusive teaching, particularly in countries where inclusive education is still in the developmental phase. Thus, the lack of targeted pedagogical support in the studied schools illustrates a structural weakness that limits teachers' ability to translate their inclusive ideals into practice (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2021).

The improvised teaching strategies and peer-based collaboration observed in the field further affirm the concept of "practical knowledge" as proposed by (Hordvik et al., 2020) in their theory of reflective practice. Teachers often relied on intuition, reflection-in-action, and collaboration with colleagues to respond to the diverse needs of their students. While such adaptive behaviors are commendable and reflect professional commitment, they also indicate systemic gaps where institutional training and resources should have existed. These findings align with (Tai et al., 2022), who argue that inclusive education can only be sustainably implemented when teachers are equipped with both theoretical and practical tools to support all learners.

The significant variation in inclusive practice between classrooms also brings to light the institutional context's influence, as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory suggested. Teachers do not operate in isolation; their actions are shaped by interactions within multiple systems the classroom, the school, the community, and broader education policies (Febriani et al., 2023). The study found that teachers who received strong support from school leadership, including access to special education staff and flexible teaching resources, were far more effective in managing inclusive classrooms. This supports (Wulan & Sanjaya, 2022) view that inclusive education is a school-wide effort that requires systemic

alignment, shared values, and a collaborative culture. Where these conditions were absent, teachers often felt overwhelmed and unsupported, leading to the marginalization of children with special needs even within the so-called "inclusive" settings.

The emotional dimension of inclusive teaching revealed in this research also warrants attention. Teachers described their work as both emotionally taxing and deeply fulfilling. This duality reflects the (Sain et al., 2022) notion of the emotional labor of teaching, especially in inclusive contexts where the cognitive and affective demands are heightened. The emotional investment required to nurture inclusive environments often goes unrecognized in institutional planning. Yet, it plays a critical role in teacher retention, job satisfaction, and the overall sustainability of inclusive practices (Zhu, Z., Deng, Z., Wang, Q., Wang, Y., Zhang, D., Xu, R., ... & Wen, 2022). While many teachers in this study found meaning in their inclusive roles, their narratives also pointed to burnout risks due to a lack of emotional and professional support systems.

Theoretically, the findings resonate with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which emphasize the need for flexible curricula and instructional methods that accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities (Widiastuti et al., 2020). While only a few teachers in this study had explicit knowledge of UDL, several demonstrated its principles through differentiated instruction and multiple engagement means. This suggests that even without formal training, inclusive instincts can guide teachers toward effective practices. However, these instincts need to be nurtured and aligned with pedagogical frameworks to be truly effective and scalable (Blau et al., 2020).

The findings of this study both reaffirm and extend previous research and theoretical understandings of inclusive education. They highlight that successful inclusion depends on teacher attitudes and structural support, relevant training, collaborative school culture, and emotional resilience. Teachers have the potential to be agents of transformation, but they cannot and should not be expected to do this work alone. These results call for a holistic approach that integrates teacher development, policy coherence, and community involvement, ensuring that inclusive education becomes a lived reality rather than a distant ideal.

4.   CONCLUSION

A central concern drove this study: despite inclusive education being widely promoted through policy and advocacy, its practical realization in general school environments often falls short due to teachers' overlooked and unsupported role. The findings confirm that teachers are at the heart of inclusive education, not merely as policy implementers but as everyday decision-makers who shape the learning experiences of children with special needs. Their attitudes, professional competencies, and emotional resilience directly influence the success of inclusion in the classroom. However, these teachers often operate within systems that do not fully equip or support them, leaving them to navigate complex challenges with limited resources. This disconnect between policy ideals and classroom realities reflects the persistent gap in inclusive education implementation, especially in regions where infrastructure and teacher training remain underdeveloped.

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study is not without its limitations. The sample was limited to three schools in a specific geographic context, which may not represent the full diversity of inclusive practices across broader educational settings. Additionally, while the qualitative design offered a rich, in-depth understanding, it did not allow for the generalization of findings. Future research is encouraged to expand the scope of investigation across different regions and school levels and to incorporate the perspectives of students, parents, and policymakers to gain a more holistic view of inclusion. Further studies might also explore the long-term impact of targeted teacher training programs or assess the role of school leadership in sustaining inclusive cultures. By continuing to amplify the voices and experiences of teachers, future research can contribute to building more responsive, equitable, and sustainable models of inclusive education.

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