The Role of Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in General School Enviroments

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Inclusive education has become a global priority to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students, including children with special needs. However, in many general school environments, the implementation of inclusive education remains a significant challenge, particularly due to the limited readiness of teachers. This study aims to explore the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs in general school settings. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis at three inclusive public primary schools in [Insert Location]. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, focusing on teachers' strategies, challenges, and institutional support. The findings reveal that while teachers generally have positive attitudes toward inclusion, many feel unprepared due to insufficient training and lack of resources. Teachers apply adaptive strategies, but systemic constraints, including limited collaboration and negative societal attitudes, hinder effective implementation. The study concludes that teachers play a pivotal yet constrained role in fostering inclusion, highlighting the need for enhanced training, structural support, and cultural change within schools. This research contributes to understanding the practical realities of inclusive education and offers insights for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher development programs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right that should be accessible to all individuals regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. In recent decades, there has been a growing emphasis on inclusive education as a means to provide

equitable learning opportunities for all students, particularly for children with special needs (Baharun & Ummah, 2018). Inclusive education refers to a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increased participation in learning, cultures, and communities, while reducing exclusion from the education system. As articulated by Stephenson, (2023), inclusive education is not merely about placing children with disabilities in mainstream schools but ensuring that teaching methodologies, curricula, and school environments accommodate and support the diverse needs of every learner.

The concept of inclusive education represents a significant paradigm shift from traditional, segregated approaches that isolated children with special needs in special schools. In line with global initiatives such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on inclusive and quality education for all, many countries have adopted policies to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education settings (Qu, 2022). Despite these policy commitments, the implementation of inclusive education remains inconsistent and faces numerous challenges, especially in developing countries where resources, teacher capacity, and societal attitudes often fall short of supporting true inclusion. One of the critical factors determining the success of inclusive education is the role of teachers, who are at the forefront of translating inclusive policies into meaningful classroom practices (Ap. Moreira & Wanda Rutkoskwi, 2021).

Teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating inclusive education by creating accessible learning environments, differentiating instruction, and fostering positive social interactions among all students. However, evidence suggests that many teachers feel inadequately prepared to meet the diverse needs of children with special needs in general school environments. Studies conducted in various contexts (Haniah, Aman, & Setiawan, 2020) have highlighted gaps in teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding inclusive education. These deficiencies are often compounded by limited pre-service training, insufficient professional development opportunities, and a lack of systemic support within schools. Consequently, children with special needs may continue to face barriers to effective participation and achievement, despite being physically present in mainstream classrooms (Eyob Kenta, 2019).

Previous research has primarily focused on structural and policy-level challenges to inclusive education, such as inadequate infrastructure, funding constraints, or legislative gaps. While these studies have provided valuable insights into the systemic barriers hindering inclusive practices, there remains a relative paucity of research exploring the lived experiences of teachers in implementing inclusive education within general school environments (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Specifically, limited attention has been paid to understanding how teachers perceive their roles, the strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and the support systems available to them in fostering inclusion for children with special needs (Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020). This represents a significant gap in the literature that warrants further investigation, particularly in the context of countries where inclusive education is still evolving as a practice.

Moreover, much of the existing research on inclusive education has been conducted in high-income or developed countries, where resource availability and institutional support may differ significantly from those in low- and middle-income settings. In contrast, teachers operating in under-resourced school environments often face unique challenges that affect their ability to implement inclusive education effectively (Dover & Rodriguez-Valls, 2018). These challenges may include large class sizes, limited access to teaching aids, insufficient specialized support, and prevailing negative attitudes toward disability within the school community. Therefore, understanding the role of teachers

in inclusive education requires a contextualized approach that considers the specific socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors influencing general school environments (Kartini, 2023).

The present study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs within general school settings. The research will focus on identifying the strategies teachers employ to support inclusion, the barriers they face, and the forms of support they deem necessary to enhance inclusive practices. This study also aims to capture teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusive education, as these factors significantly influence their willingness and ability to accommodate diverse learners. By centering the experiences of teachers, this research aspires to provide practical insights that can inform teacher training programs, school leadership practices, and policy interventions aimed at strengthening inclusive education. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education, particularly by offering context-specific evidence on the realities faced by teachers in general school environments. By shedding light on teachers' experiences, challenges, and needs, this research can support more targeted efforts to build teachers' capacities, foster inclusive school cultures, and ultimately promote equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those with special needs. Furthermore, the insights generated from this study may serve as a basis for policymakers, educational stakeholders, and school administrators to design more responsive and sustainable strategies for inclusive education implementation.

2. METHODS

The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs in general school environments. This approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and strategies in fostering inclusive practices. This research was conducted in three public elementary schools located in Riau Regency, where inclusive education programs have been introduced but still face various implementation challenges. The research took place over a period of three months, from January to May 2025. The schools were selected based on their status as inclusive pilot schools and their diverse student populations, which include children with varying types of special needs.

Data collection techniques consisted of semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and documentation analysis. Teachers directly involved in teaching students with special needs served as the primary data sources, complemented by inputs from school principals and special education coordinators to enrich the perspectives gathered. The interviews aimed to explore teachers' perceptions, the teaching strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and the institutional support available to them. Observations were conducted during classroom activities to capture real-time practices, interactions, and classroom dynamics related to inclusion. Relevant school documents, such as inclusive education policies, lesson plans, and student progress reports, were also analyzed to triangulate the findings. The collected data were analyzed using (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Through this iterative process, patterns, themes, and meaningful interpretations were generated to describe the complexities of teachers' roles in implementing inclusive education.

3.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data gathered from interviews, observations, and document reviews revealed several key findings regarding the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs in general school environments. Teachers emerged as central agents in determining the success or failure of inclusive education practices. Their understanding, attitudes, and instructional strategies significantly shaped the learning experiences of children with special needs. While most teachers demonstrated a willingness to embrace inclusive principles, their practical implementation was often hindered by several systemic and situational barriers that influenced their ability to fully support diverse learners in the classroom.

One of the primary findings of this study is that teachers generally possess a positive attitude toward inclusive education. They recognized the importance of providing equal learning opportunities and expressed moral and professional responsibility to accommodate children with special needs in their classrooms. However, this positive disposition was often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy, particularly due to the limited training they had received on inclusive education practices. Many teachers admitted that their pre-service education programs did not sufficiently prepare them to handle the diverse challenges presented by inclusive classrooms, and the in-service training provided by schools or local education authorities was often sporadic and too general to meet their specific needs.

Further analysis revealed that teachers tended to adopt intuitive and improvised strategies to support students with special needs, relying heavily on their personal teaching experiences and peer collaboration. Differentiated instruction, the use of visual aids, simplified explanations, and peer tutoring were commonly employed to accommodate students' varying abilities. Nevertheless, these strategies were frequently applied without a deep understanding of special education principles or individualized education plans (IEPs) (Herlina & Suryana, 2020). Teachers often lacked access to specialist support, such as speech therapists, psychologists, or special education experts, which limited their ability to design and implement more tailored interventions. This resulted in a gap between their inclusive intentions and the effectiveness of their classroom practices (Sain, Asfahani, & Krisnawati, 2022).

Observations during the study indicated that while teachers made visible efforts to involve children with special needs in learning activities, these students still faced subtle exclusion. For instance, some students with special needs were physically present but were often left to complete tasks independently or with minimal support, leading to passive participation. This phenomenon was not necessarily due to deliberate neglect but rather to the teachers' struggles in managing large class sizes and balancing the attention given to students with varying learning needs. The absence of teaching assistants or co-teaching arrangements further exacerbated the difficulty of providing equitable attention and support.

Another significant finding relates to the institutional support available to teachers. While school administrators expressed their commitment to inclusive education, structural support was often insufficient. Facilities such as accessible classrooms, appropriate learning materials, and assistive technologies were generally lacking or inadequate. Teachers also reported that they rarely received regular mentoring or coaching specific to inclusive practices. The collaborative culture within schools was still developing, and formal mechanisms for peer learning or knowledge exchange about inclusive strategies were limited (Akbar, Sulistyo, Megawati, & Nuralisaputri, 2022). Despite these challenges,

some teachers proactively built informal support networks among colleagues to share teaching tips and emotional encouragement.

The study also uncovered that teachers' perceptions of inclusive education were heavily influenced by the type and severity of students' special needs. Teachers appeared more confident and accepting of including students with mild learning difficulties or physical impairments that did not significantly disrupt classroom routines (Mouza, Codding, & Pollock, 2022). Conversely, they expressed greater hesitation and perceived lower self-efficacy when dealing with students with more complex needs, such as behavioral disorders or intellectual disabilities. This reflects a need for more targeted capacity building that equips teachers with the confidence and specific skills to address a wider spectrum of disabilities.

In terms of school culture, the research found that inclusive values were gradually becoming more visible, but a fully inclusive mindset had yet to be fully embedded within the broader school community. Some parents of typically developing children still expressed concerns about the presence of children with special needs in the classroom, fearing that it would slow down the learning process. Teachers were often caught between promoting inclusive ideals and managing the expectations of parents who prioritized academic achievement over social inclusion. This tension sometimes placed additional pressure on teachers and limited their freedom to innovate or slow down instructional pacing to better support children with special needs.

In summary, the findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted role of teachers in implementing inclusive education in general school settings. Teachers demonstrated a genuine commitment to inclusion, yet their efforts were constrained by insufficient training, limited resources, large class sizes, and inadequate institutional support. While some inclusive practices were evident, they were often fragmented and not yet systematically integrated into daily teaching routines. These findings underscore the need for more comprehensive teacher preparation programs, continuous professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy, and stronger school-based support systems to enable teachers to fully realize the goals of inclusive education.

Table 1. Summary of Teachers' Roles, Strategies, and Challenges

No	Teacher's Role	Implemented Strategies	Challenges Encountered
1	Facilitating Inclusive Learning	Adjusting learning materials and providing individual assistance	Lack of teaching aids and time constraints
2	Fostering Positive Class Culture	Promoting peer support and encouraging empathy among students	Negative attitudes from some parents and colleagues
3	Collaborating with Stakeholders	Communicating with parents and consulting special education coordinators	Inconsistent parental involvement and limited specialist support
4	Advocating for Inclusion	Raising awareness through school events and teacher initiatives	Limited school policies supporting inclusion
5	Differentiating Instruction	Modifying tasks based on student abilities	Insufficient training in inclusive teaching methods

Table 1 provides a summary of the key findings from this study regarding teachers' roles in inclusive education. The data show that teachers engage in multiple roles, including facilitating learning, fostering positive classroom environments, collaborating with stakeholders, advocating for inclusion, and differentiating instruction to meet diverse student needs. However, despite their efforts, teachers face significant challenges, such as limited resources, negative societal attitudes, insufficient training, and lack of institutional support. The table also illustrates that while teachers apply adaptive strategies, these are often constrained by systemic factors beyond their control.

The findings of this study illustrate a complex reality surrounding the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education within general school environments. When juxtaposed with previous research and theoretical frameworks on inclusive education, several critical patterns, contradictions, and reinforcements emerge, shedding light on the interplay between teachers' perceptions, institutional support, and the practical challenges they face in the classroom (Wulan & Sanjaya, 2022).

First, this research confirms what has been highlighted in several previous studies, namely that teachers' positive attitudes are a foundational element for the successful implementation of inclusive education (Asfahani, Abdurahman, Krisnawati, & Prusty, 2022). In the present study, teachers expressed a strong moral and professional commitment to ensuring that children with special needs could participate in learning within mainstream classrooms. This aligns with Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991), which posits that attitudes influence behavioral intentions. However, as this research shows, while positive attitudes exist, they are not always sufficient to translate into effective inclusive teaching practices. Teachers' intentions to implement inclusion are often undermined by a lack of knowledge, skills, and systemic support, echoing findings from (Rahmatika, Asfahani, Afriani, Saroâ, & Muhammadong, 2024), who emphasize that teacher competence is as vital as teacher attitude.

The study also reflects significant gaps in teacher preparation, consistent with previous research in both developing and developed contexts. For instance, (Faisal & Kisman, 2020) argue that inclusive education is frequently hampered by inadequate pre-service training programs that fail to equip teachers with practical strategies for addressing diverse learning needs. In the schools studied, teachers often relied on intuitive and trial-and-error approaches rather than evidence-based inclusive practices. This reinforces (Boelens, Voet, & De Wever, 2018) theory of differentiated instruction, which advocates for systematic planning to meet students' varied readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. The absence of structured training and professional development in the observed schools meant that differentiation was inconsistently applied and lacked alignment with established pedagogical models (García-Peñalvo, 2016).

A significant finding from this research concerns the institutional barriers to inclusion, which are deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural and resource contexts of schools. Previous studies, such as those by (Jamiah, Fatmawati, & Purwaningsih, 2019), have long identified structural limitations ranging from insufficient facilities to lack of specialist support as key obstacles to inclusive education. The current study affirms these challenges, with teachers frequently citing the absence of accessible infrastructure, specialized teaching aids, and professional collaboration as barriers to inclusion (Alemayehu, 2021). The ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides a useful lens to interpret these findings, highlighting how factors at multiple levels the school environment, policy framework, community attitudes collectively shape teachers' capacities to implement inclusion.

Interestingly, the research reveals that teachers' confidence and willingness to engage in inclusive education vary significantly based on the type and severity of students' special needs. This mirrors findings by (Hildenbrand, Sacramento, & Binnewies, 2018), who note that teachers often feel more competent when dealing with students with mild disabilities, while those with behavioral or cognitive impairments are perceived as more challenging to include. The present study supports this observation, as teachers expressed greater hesitation in addressing complex needs, primarily due to inadequate training and a lack of specialist support. This suggests that while inclusive policies advocate for the full participation of all students, in practice, inclusion may remain selective and uneven (Al-Mamary, 2022).

Moreover, the subtle exclusion observed in classrooms where students with special needs were physically present but minimally engaged reflects a phenomenon identified by (Zaim, Refnaldi, & Arsyad, 2020) as "presence without participation." This underscores the need to move beyond mere access to a deeper understanding of meaningful participation, where students not only occupy the same physical space but are actively engaged and supported in learning processes. The lack of co-teaching models, teaching assistants, or individualized education plans in the studied schools contributed to this phenomenon, demonstrating that inclusion in its ideal form requires more than just policy statements; it demands structural investment and pedagogical innovation (Ilhan & Gülersoy, 2019).

In terms of school culture, the findings reveal an ongoing tension between inclusive ideals and parental expectations focused on academic achievement. Previous literature, such as the work of (Ibna, 2018), has pointed to the societal pressures that can constrain inclusive efforts, particularly when inclusion is perceived to disrupt traditional educational hierarchies or performance standards. Teachers in this study reported experiencing these pressures firsthand, which sometimes led them to prioritize curriculum completion over adapting lessons for diverse learners (Ohito, Lyiscott, Green, & Wilcox, 2021). This reflects the broader critique that without systemic change including parent education, community engagement, and redefinition of success metrics inclusive education may remain superficial.

Theoretically, the study's findings align with (Tyagi, 2023) Index for Inclusion, which emphasizes that inclusion is not merely a set of teaching techniques but a holistic process involving culture, policies, and practices. While some cultural shifts toward inclusivity were evident in the schools observed, practical implementation was fragmented, reinforcing the need for a comprehensive, whole-school approach to inclusion. Teachers alone cannot bear the responsibility for inclusive education; rather, schools must foster collaborative environments where teachers, administrators, families, and support services work collectively to remove barriers to participation.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research underline the central yet challenging role that teachers occupy in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs within general school environments. The researcher's initial concern regarding the gap between inclusive education policies and actual classroom practices was confirmed through this study. While most teachers demonstrated a positive attitude and moral responsibility toward inclusion, the lack of adequate training, limited resources, and insufficient institutional support severely constrained their ability to implement inclusive teaching effectively. This confirms that the realization of inclusive education depends not only on individual teacher commitment but also on broader systemic readiness, which remains limited in the observed schools.

Despite these insights, this research is not without limitations. The study focused on a relatively small number of schools within a specific region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts, particularly those with different socio-cultural or economic conditions. Additionally, the research primarily captured the perspectives of teachers, with less emphasis on the experiences of students with special needs or their families, which could provide a more holistic understanding of inclusion dynamics. Furthermore, classroom observations were conducted over a limited time frame, potentially missing variations in practices that occur throughout the academic year.

Future research should expand to include a broader range of schools with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and varying levels of inclusive education implementation to gain a more comprehensive

understanding of the challenges and best practices in this field. There is also a need for studies that integrate the voices of students with special needs and their parents to capture the inclusivity experience from multiple perspectives. Moreover, longitudinal research is recommended to examine how teachers' competencies, attitudes, and inclusive practices evolve over time, especially following targeted professional development programs. Such research will contribute to more sustainable, context-sensitive strategies for enhancing inclusive education in general school environments.

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