



Contemporary Global Challenges Faced by Teachers in an Inclusive Classroom with Children with Special Needs

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Abstract- Teachers are widely recognized as the most critical agents in making inclusive education work, yet they face persistent, multidimensional challenges that undermine effective practice. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the contemporary global challenges confronting teachers in inclusive classrooms serving children with special needs, organized across six domains: (i) attitudinal and psychological barriers, (ii) inadequate training and professional preparation, (iii) classroom management and instructional difficulties, (iv) self-efficacy and burnout, (v) collaboration and support deficits, and (vi) resource and infrastructure limitations. Drawing on international research — including meta-analyses covering over 40,000 teachers across 55 countries — the review finds that while teacher attitudes toward inclusion have progressed positively from 2000 to 2020, significant pockets of negativity persist, particularly regarding students with severe disabilities. The gap between what teachers need to know and what they receive in per-service training remains the most consistently identified barrier, though evidence confirms that targeted training positively affects both attitudes ($r = 0.75$, $p = 0.001$) and professional competence. In inclusive settings, teacher self-efficacy emerges as a strong predictor of inclusive practice, yet burnout rates are elevated among non-specialist teachers, with a counter intuitive finding that teachers with the most positive attitudes toward inclusion may experience the greatest burnout. The review identifies evidence-based strategies for addressing these challenges, including comprehensive ongoing professional development, self-efficacy and resilience building, strengthened collaborative support systems, reduced structural barriers, and mentoring networks. The paper concludes that addressing the systemic challenges teachers face requires coordinated action across per-service education, school-level administrative support, and national policy frameworks to fulfill the global commitment to equitable, quality education for all children with disabilities.

Keywords- inclusive education, special needs, teacher challenges, teacher attitudes, self-efficacy, burnout, professional development, differentiated instruction

I. Introduction

Teachers are universally recognize as the most critical agents in making inclusive education work. They serve as facilitators, guides, and advocates for children with diverse learning needs. Yet the transition to inclusive classrooms has placed extraordinary demands on educators who are often inadequately prepared, insufficiently supported, and expected to meet the needs of increasingly diverse learners within systems that were not designed for such complexity.



The range of learning difficulties, potential knowledge outcomes, teachers' attitudes, and teachers' lack of confidence in teaching in an inclusive atmosphere are key reasons educators have concerns about inclusion. Despite various initiatives in the form of laws and policies by governments, around 90% of disabled individuals remain unserved, raising the critical question of whether inclusive education really serves the needs of the disabled, or whether the exercise leads to "dumping" of children with special needs in regular classrooms without creating the support structures and facilities necessary to meet their unique needs.

This paper is carried out with the objectives of conducting a detailed examination of the challenges teachers face in inclusive settings, organized into six domains: (i) attitudinal and psychological barriers, (ii) inadequate training and professional preparation, (iii) classroom management and instructional difficulties, (iv) self-efficacy and burnout, (v) collaboration and support deficits, and (vi) resource and infrastructure limitations.

II. Attitudinal and Psychological Barriers

The Centrality of Teacher Attitudes

Teacher attitudes represent the single most studied variable in inclusive education research and for good reason. Among the most critical barriers to inclusion are teachers' attitudes and classroom practices, which play a decisive role in its success. The positive beliefs of a teacher towards inclusive education (cognitive component of attitude) are most strongly associated with the social adaptation of a student with a disability; the teacher's readiness to modify the physical environment, communication methods, and assessment methods is related to the social adaptation of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

A landmark meta-analysis by Guillemot, Lacroix, and Nocus (2022) covering a total sample of 40,512 in-service or pre-service teachers from 55 different countries found that, globally, teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education are positive. A meta-regression analysis showed that attitudes have notably progressed from 2000 to 2020. Teachers' attitudes are more favourable when the country's Human Development Index (HDI) is higher, and special education teachers are more favourable to inclusive education than general education teachers.

Another major meta-analysis by Steen and Wilson (2020), analysing 64 samples, confirmed that teachers hold a positive attitude towards inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, but that these attitudes are moderated by an interplay of cultural and demographical factors.

Ambivalence and Negative Attitudes

Despite overall positive trends, significant pockets of negativity persist. A study examining teachers' attitudes in Irbid, Jordan (n=487), found that the mean score for teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities was 2.19 (on a scale where higher scores indicate more positive attitudes), indicating negative attitudes overall. Teachers with less than 10 years of experience held more favourable views than more experienced colleagues.



A Kuwaiti study surveying 560 teachers and head teachers found a mixed attitude towards inclusion, with teachers overall being "quite negative about the concept". Interestingly, mainstream school teachers were more supportive than special school teachers, and male teachers were more supportive than female teachers.

Factors Shaping Attitudes

Research from Western Australia (n=74 primary school teachers) identified four teacher attributes: age, gender, teaching self-efficacy, and training that collectively explained 42% of the variability in teachers' attitudes toward including students with disabilities.

In Ethiopia, a review of studies found that teachers' attitudes were influenced by the nature and severity of the disabling condition, the teacher's training, experience, gender, and the availability of support. Teachers universally report greater difficulty with students who have severe disabilities. A pilot study of 30 Indian teachers found that while many hold a positive attitude toward inclusive education, they face numerous challenges in its implementation, including a lack of specialised training, insufficient support services, and inadequate teaching materials. Teachers expressed particular difficulty in supporting students with severe disabilities.

III. Inadequate Training and Professional Preparation

The Training Gap

The gap between what teachers need to know and what they actually receive in pre-service training remains the most consistently identified barrier to effective inclusion. The present school system is progressively moving towards inclusivity, yet a crucial aspect, the attitude and competence of both pre-service and in-service teachers toward integrating children with special needs, remains underdeveloped. Covering inclusive education topics within existing curricula is not sufficient to prepare highly qualified, competent teaching staff able to work in an inclusive education environment. Recent studies and practice have shown that the existing approach falls short of producing educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for inclusive classrooms.

A study in Israel (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019) that interviewed 10 teachers who recently completed a special education training programme revealed their frustration at the lack of preparation to accommodate students with learning disabilities in mainstream classes. After completing their coursework in special education, however, they experienced a change in both their attitudes and their ability to effectively implement inclusion.

Pre-Service vs. In-Service Training

A 2025 study by Chakrawarty and Pallai, sampling 70 teachers (35 pre-service and 35 in-service) from Tezpur, Assam, compared the attitudes of both groups toward including children with special needs. The results highlighted different perspectives and identified significant challenges in classroom transactions for both groups.



Training on inclusive education has a demonstrably positive effect. A study of 146 teachers found that training on inclusive education ($r = 0.75$, $n = 146$, $p = 0.001$) positively affected teachers' attitudes, while gender did not. The study concluded that developing teacher training programs should be a priority because it enhances professional competence.

What Effective Training Looks Like

A systematic review by Pinter et al. (2020), analysing 35 studies, identified best practices for teacher preparation: content for inclusion infused in teacher education courses, attention early and often to attitudes and dispositions toward inclusion, opportunities for collaboration and co-teaching, strong university-school partnerships, and collaboration among teacher education faculty.

A qualitative study across four Israeli teacher education colleges (34 interviews) revealed four interrelated themes: the value of practical fieldwork experience, the need for stronger theoretical foundations in inclusion, challenges in bridging theory and practice, and the importance of professional development for teacher educators.

IV. Classroom Management and Instructional Challenges

Managing Diverse Learners

Classrooms in the 21st century have by law become inclusive, typically comprising general education and special needs students. Included students who present with mild to moderate learning and behavioural challenges add another layer of complexity to classroom management, requiring teachers to be highly structured, consistent, and reinforcing. Teacher fidelity to behavioural expectations established for the classroom is essential.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classes provides teachers with an opportunity to identify classroom management policies and practices that promote diversity and community. Community-building management strategies that facilitate friendships, collaboration, and parent involvement, and that address challenging behaviours in a positive, proactive, and educative manner, are consistent with the goals of inclusive education.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction, a comprehensive approach encompassing individualised curricula, teaching methods, materials, and assessment strategies, has at its roots the impetus for effective inclusive schooling, providing supports directly within general education classrooms for students with the full range of exceptionalities.

Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, and Reid (2005) argued for planning responsive lessons that differentiate instruction for all students from the outset, rather than modifying a single lesson for disabled students. General-education teachers, who, with appropriate supports, learn to attend to every student's individual needs, can replace the specially designed, often uninteresting one-to-one skills and drills typically suggested for disabled students with responsive class activities.



However, responsive classroom management in inclusive education requires the principles of equity, flexibility, collaboration, and self-regulation, all within adaptive curricula, assistive technology integration, and positive behaviour management demands that most teachers have not been trained to meet.

The Challenge of Severe Disabilities

Teachers consistently report that the nature and severity of disability significantly affect their capacity to provide inclusive education. The Indian pilot study (n=30 teachers) found that teachers expressed particular difficulty in supporting students with severe disabilities, and that the challenges were compounded by a lack of specialised training, insufficient support services, and inadequate teaching materials.

V. Self-Efficacy and Teacher Burnout

Self-Efficacy as a Determinant of Success

Teacher self-efficacy

A teacher's belief in their capacity to organise classroom learning that meets students' diverse needs is one of the strongest predictors of inclusive practice. In inclusive education, teachers' self-efficacy is observed in three areas: instructional efficacy, collaboration efficacy, and behaviour management efficacy.

A study in Romania (n=126 primary school teachers) found a significant positive correlation between teachers' perceived self-efficacy and their attitudes towards inclusive education. Younger primary school teachers had more positive attitudes towards children with special educational needs.

A literature review by Kristiana (2018), analysing 33 articles (N=3,472), found that teacher self-efficacy predictors come from internal factors (knowledge, personality profiles, experience interacting with disabled people, teaching experience, training) or external/situational factors (school climate). Teacher self-efficacy impacts attitudes and behaviours toward inclusion, work attitude (e.g., burnout, job satisfaction), and collective self-efficacy.

Burnout in Inclusive Settings

Teaching in inclusive classrooms carries high psychological costs. A large-scale study (N=7,528— including 7,086 regular teachers and 442 special education teachers) found that non-specialist teachers showed higher levels of burnout than specialist teachers in inclusive schools. Higher levels of burnout were correlated with vulnerability to stress, including perfectionism, inhibition, lack of social support, adverse living conditions, and dramatisation of existence. Non-specialists with more professional experience showed higher global burnout scores. Teachers with higher levels of training (academic degree and specialisation) showed less vulnerability to stress.

Friesen, Shory, and Lamoureux (2023) investigated 62 elementary teachers and found that while self-efficacy was associated with lower burnout, greater teacher-controlled beliefs, emphasis on grades, and holding entity views (beliefs that learning ability is



fixed) were associated with higher burnout scores. Teachers who had both higher self-efficacy and endorsed student-centred approaches reported experiencing less burnout.

A particularly striking finding from earlier research by Talmor, Reiter, and Feigin (n=330 primary school teachers) was that the more positive the teacher's attitude towards inclusion, the more the teacher experienced burnout in the category of self-fulfilment, a counterintuitive finding suggesting that committed inclusive teachers may exhaust themselves trying to meet unrealistic demands. The number of students with special needs in the classroom and perceptions of inadequate support also correlated with higher burnout.

Sarıcam and Sakız (2014), studying 118 special education teachers in Turkey, demonstrated, through structural equation modelling, that the domains of burnout were strongly predicted by self-efficacy, highlighting the importance of self-efficacy beliefs for special education staff's emotional involvement, sense of accomplishment, and engagement.

The Self-Efficacy–Burnout Nexus

The most commonly identified negative factors are job stress and job satisfaction, which are major contributors to the decline in self-efficacy among mainstream teachers. For inclusive teachers specifically, a key factor in low self-efficacy is the lack of training and skills for teaching students with special needs.

VI. Collaboration and Support Deficits

The Need for Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Effective inclusion requires robust collaboration between general education teachers, special education teachers, therapists, administrators, parents, and community members. Yet this collaboration frequently falls short. A systematic review of inclusive education in Pakistan found that a lack of collaborative and supportive practices was among the most persistent barriers.

Teachers have been seen as key persons to implement inclusive education and considered to play a substantial role, yet the factors that influence their attitudes and concerns are multiple and interconnected. A cross-sectional survey of 100 teachers (50 mainstream and 50 special education) in Lahore, Pakistan, found that the teacher type (mainstream vs. special) had a statistically significant influence on attitudes and concerns about inclusion.

Family-School Partnership Gaps

Family involvement and community support emerge as critical enablers, yet teachers often report inadequate mechanisms for parent engagement. The shift to emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the imperative of collaboration between special education teachers and families, revealing that stakeholders were frequently unprepared for the challenges.



VII. Resource and Infrastructure Limitations

Material and Technological Barriers

Teachers consistently report that the lack of appropriate teaching-learning materials, assistive technologies, and accessible physical infrastructure undermines their ability to create genuinely inclusive classrooms. Lack of child-centred and relevant curriculum, limited appropriate teaching-learning materials, and lack of proper infrastructure are among the most cited barriers.

A 2025 systematic review of 23 studies found that students with disabilities have limited access to assistive technology because of inadequate funding, limited training opportunities for instructors and students, stigmatisation due to limited community awareness, and low institutional capacity.

A survey of 40 special education teachers from a teacher training institute examined attitudes toward ICT integration in inclusive classrooms and aimed to assess the influence of teachers' experience and ICT proficiency on their attitudes, uncovering potential barriers and facilitators to ICT use.

Large Class Sizes and Workload

Large class sizes remain one of the most practical barriers to differentiated instruction. Teachers face lack of trained colleagues, large class sizes, lack of child-centred and relevant curriculum, and insufficient competence to modify methodology as per diverse learner needs. The educator's capacity to use differentiated instruction, support emotional needs, and provide professional supports within a larger framework is necessary for inclusion, but educators find themselves increasingly challenged by inclusion occurring at a time when resources are being continuously limited and public scrutiny is increasingly prominent.

VIII. Strategies for Addressing Teacher Challenges

Based on the reviewed evidence, several evidence-based strategies emerge for supporting teachers in inclusive schools:

Comprehensive and Ongoing Professional Development

Training must be comprehensive, reflective, and ongoing, not a one-off workshop. It should address knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills simultaneously. Teacher training programs should include practical fieldwork experience alongside stronger theoretical foundations, with a focus on bridging theory and practice. Training programs that specifically target IEP development, differentiated instruction, and behaviour management demonstrably improve teacher competencies.

Building Self-Efficacy and Resilience

Supporting the development of inclusive beliefs and building self-efficacy may support teacher well-being. Teachers who had both higher self-efficacy and endorsed student-centred approaches reported experiencing less burnout. Mindfulness directly



and positively predicts creative self-efficacy in teachers in inclusive classrooms, with resilience serving as a mediator.

Strengthening Collaborative Support Systems

Teachers cannot succeed in isolation. Effective inclusion requires co-teaching models, specialist consultation, administrative support, and structured collaboration with families. Community-building management strategies that facilitate friendships, collaboration, and parent involvement must be central to school culture.

Reducing Structural Barriers

Smaller class sizes, adequate funding for assistive technologies, accessible infrastructure, and curriculum materials designed using Universal Design for Learning principles are foundational. Without these structural supports, even the best-trained and most positively disposed teacher will struggle.

Mentoring and Peer Support Networks

Teachers benefit from peer learning communities and mentoring by experienced inclusive educators. School leaders play a pivotal role in creating a culture that values diversity and supports teacher experimentation and growth.

IX. Conclusion

The challenges teachers face in inclusive schools are systemic, multidimensional, and deeply interconnected. Attitudinal barriers persist despite overall positive trends; training remains insufficient despite clear evidence that it works; classroom demands exceed what most teachers have been prepared to handle; self-efficacy and burnout exist in a delicate balance that can tip in either direction; collaboration structures are often inadequate; and resource limitations undermine even the most committed educators.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action at every level from pre-service education and in-service professional development, to school-level administrative support, to national policy frameworks that provide adequate funding and monitoring. The evidence is unambiguous: teachers are the linchpin of inclusive education, and investing in their preparation, support, and well-being is not merely desirable but essential for fulfilling the global commitment to equitable quality education for all children with disabilities.

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