

Challenges Faced by Malaysian Private Preschool Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is widely recognised as a foundation of equitable learning, ensuring that children of diverse backgrounds and abilities have access to high-quality education. While Malaysia has made progress in promoting inclusive practices, private preschools continue to face distinct challenges in implementing inclusive education. This study explores the challenges faced by teachers in Malaysian private preschools in implementing inclusive education, with attention to teacher preparedness, perceptions of inclusion, classroom conditions, and institutional support. A qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with five private preschool teachers who had experience working with children with special educational needs (SEN). Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed four key themes: teacher experience and professional preparedness; perceived benefits and practical challenges of inclusion; classroom capacity, staffing, and teacher workload; and institutional support and investment. Participants reported uneven exposure to SEN teaching and inconsistent access to specialised training, while also recognising the social benefits of inclusive education. However, curriculum limitations, classroom-management concerns, large class sizes, insufficient support staff, and teacher fatigue constrained effective implementation. Participants further highlighted the need for stronger institutional and governmental support, particularly in professional training, staffing, facilities, and financial resources. The study concludes that strengthening inclusive education in private preschools requires practical, specialised teacher development alongside greater structural and resource support. These measures are necessary to reduce the gap between inclusive education policy and classroom practice and to promote more equitable early childhood education for children with SEN across different preschool settings in Malaysia.

Keywords: inclusive education, private preschools, special educational needs, early childhood education, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a fundamental pillar of global efforts to guarantee equitable learning opportunities for all children, regardless of ability or background. As a signatory to international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Malaysia has embedded inclusive education as one of the strategic targets of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Supermaniam & Hamdan, 2025), signalling a national commitment to integrating children with special needs into mainstream classrooms from an early age. This commitment is further reinforced in the Rancangan Pendidikan Malaysia (RPM) 2026–2035, which continues to emphasise access and equity while strengthening educational provision for diverse learners, including children with special educational needs from the preschool stage onward (Ministry of Education, 2026). Yet despite this policy momentum, a persistent gap remains between stated intentions and everyday classroom realities, particularly at the preschool level where inclusive practices are still emerging rather than firmly established (Abu Bakar & Nordin, 2024).

Much of the existing research on inclusive education in Malaysia has concentrated on public schooling and formal special education settings, leaving private preschools comparatively under-examined even though they serve a substantial proportion of young children nationwide. This is a notable gap, since private preschools typically operate with less government oversight, fewer subsidies, and more commercially driven curricula than their public counterparts, conditions that may shape how — or whether — inclusive practices take root. Recent studies suggest that teachers across Malaysian educational settings continue to report inadequate training in special needs pedagogy, limited access to teaching aids and support staff, and curricula ill-suited to individualised learning needs, all of which constrain their capacity to implement inclusion meaningfully (Abu Bakar & Nordin, 2024). Preschool teachers in particular have been found to require greater exposure to special needs modules and pedagogy, alongside structured support groups to strengthen their emotional readiness, knowledge, and skills for handling diverse learners (Samsuddin & Mustafa, 2025).

Teachers' beliefs and self-efficacy have also emerged as central to how inclusive education unfolds in practice (Kazmi et al., 2023). Evidence indicates that while many educators hold genuinely positive attitudes toward the principle of inclusion, these attitudes are frequently undermined by low confidence in their own ability to execute it, especially when institutional support, professional development, and manageable class sizes are lacking. Comparable findings from neighbouring contexts echo this pattern: teachers often express a sincere commitment to inclusive values while simultaneously feeling underprepared and unsupported, a tension that can produce feelings of being "lost" or overwhelmed rather than empowered (Ibrahim & Pang, 2023). Such findings underscore that inclusive education is not solely a matter of teacher willingness, but is deeply shaped by the structural and institutional environment surrounding the classroom — curriculum orientation, class size, availability of trained assistants, and management-level support.

Overall, this body of work points to inclusive education as a multifaceted challenge requiring alignment between individual teacher capacity and systemic, institutional conditions. However, few studies have examined how these dynamics play out specifically within Malaysian private preschools, where resource constraints and academically driven curricula may intensify the barriers already documented in the broader literature. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by exploring the challenges faced by Malaysian private preschool teachers in implementing inclusive education, with particular attention to the interplay between their professional beliefs and the institutional environments in which they work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The urgency of addressing inclusive education stems from a well-documented global and national rise in the number of children identified with disabilities and special educational needs. Globally, over 50 million children under the age of five are estimated to live with mild-to-severe disabilities, the majority residing in low- and middle-income countries where early intervention and inclusive services remain limited (Olusanya et al., 2024). This trend is mirrored within Malaysia, where the population of registered persons with disabilities grew from 674,500 in 2022 to 736,607 in 2023, and further to over 800,000 by 2024 (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2024, 2025). The number of children diagnosed with autism specifically has risen sharply, from 6,991 registered cases in 2013 to 53,323 in 2023, representing a 663% increase over a decade (Ova, 2024). Within the education sector, official statistics show that the number of students with special educational needs increased across every schooling level in 2024 compared to 2023, with preschool-level enrolment rising by 5.6%, outpacing growth at the secondary level (DOSM, 2025). Taken together, these figures indicate that the population of young children requiring inclusive early education support is expanding steadily, reinforcing the urgency of examining how well preschool institutions — public and private alike — are equipped to accommodate this growing need.

This upward trend is not unique to Malaysia; it reflects a broader global recognition that early childhood represents a critical window for inclusive intervention. UNESCO and UNICEF's first joint Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (2024) emphasises that inclusive, quality early learning is foundational to lifelong development, yet notes that access remains highly uneven, with almost 60% of children in low-income countries lacking any form of organized early learning opportunity. The report further estimates that meeting global early childhood targets by 2030 will require an additional USD 21 billion in funding and at least six million more trained educators worldwide (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024), underscoring that resourcing and

workforce capacity — not merely policy commitment — remain major challenges internationally. Complementing this, UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2021) argues that early childhood education can meaningfully narrow developmental gaps for disadvantaged children, but only where inclusion is embedded as a guiding design principle from the outset, rather than modify onto existing mainstream programmes. Similarly, a global review of early childhood development strategy notes that despite the Sustainable Development Goals explicitly targeting inclusive access to early learning for children under five, no unified global implementation strategy currently exists, leaving individual countries to interpret and resource inclusive early childhood policy according to their own capacity (Olusanya et al., 2024). These international findings suggest that the tension between inclusive policy ambition and practical implementation observed in Malaysia is part of a wider global pattern, in which early childhood settings — being less regulated and resourced than primary schooling — often lag behind in translating inclusive commitments into classroom practice. This pattern sets the stage for examining to what extent are Malaysia's early childhood policies being translated into consistent preschool-level practice.

Malaysia's commitment to inclusive education is formally anchored in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which set a target of 75% enrolment of children with special needs in inclusive programmes by 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2013). Official data indicate substantial growth in participation, from 50.49% in 2018 to 71.84% in 2020 and 83.47% in 2022, although continued attention to the quality and consistency of inclusive provision remains necessary. Against this backdrop, the Rancangan Pendidikan Malaysia (RPM) 2026–2035 places renewed emphasis on access and equity, reflecting the need to strengthen educational opportunities and support for learners with diverse needs, including children with special educational needs (Ministry of Education, 2026). This persistent gap between policy ambition and classroom reality has been attributed to a combination of teacher unpreparedness, insufficient institutional support, and structural barriers within schools (Abu Bakar & Nordin, 2024). Such findings suggest that inclusive education in Malaysia remains a work in progress even within the public sector, which receives considerably more government oversight and funding than private early childhood institutions.

A recurring theme across recent Malaysian studies is the inadequacy of teacher training in inclusive and special needs pedagogy. Teachers have been found to lack the knowledge and practical skills needed to implement inclusive programmes effectively, particularly in co-teaching and differentiated instruction, often resulting in continued reliance on conventional teaching approaches (Abu Bakar & Nordin, 2024). Preschool-level research reflects a similar concern, with Samsuddin and Mustafa (2025) highlighting the need for greater exposure to special needs modules and structured mentoring, ideally beginning during pre-service training. Comparable challenges have also been observed in developing-country contexts, where early childhood educators are expected to support diverse learning needs despite limited specialised preparation.

Beyond formal training, teachers' underlying attitudes and self-efficacy have emerged as critical determinants of inclusive practice. Positive attitudes toward inclusion do not automatically translate into confident implementation; teachers with a stronger sense of self-efficacy have been shown to be better positioned to accommodate learners with mild disabilities, whereas weak self-efficacy is linked to hesitancy in providing inclusive classroom settings even among teachers who philosophically support inclusion (Kazmi et al., 2023). This tension between belief and capability has also been documented outside Malaysia: in the Maldives, preschool teachers reported both hope and a sense of being "lost" when confronted with mixed-disability classrooms lacking adequate support, illustrating that positive dispositions toward inclusion can coexist with genuine feelings of inadequacy (Ibrahim & Pang, 2023). Comparable research from South Asia similarly links teacher attitudes directly to the successful accommodation of diverse learners, reinforcing self-efficacy as a consistent predictor of inclusive practice across cultural contexts (Kazmi et al., 2023).

A parallel body of literature emphasises that inclusive practice is shaped not only by individual teacher disposition but also by institutional conditions. In Malaysia, shortages of educational resources, high workloads, inadequate pedagogical support, and rigid curriculum expectations have been identified as key barriers to effective inclusion, particularly where limited flexibility restricts individualised learning for children with diverse needs (Supermaniam & Hamdan, 2025). These challenges reflect the broader view of inclusive education as a systemic reform requiring coordinated improvements in teacher preparation, curriculum design, resource provision, and school-community collaboration.

Despite this growing body of research, the overwhelming majority of Malaysian studies on inclusive education have focused on public primary and secondary schools, or on public preschool programmes operating under Ministry of Education oversight (Samsuddin & Mustafa, 2025). Private preschools, which operate with greater curricular autonomy, less regulatory oversight, and typically without government subsidies for special needs support, remain comparatively unexamined. Given that private institutions often adopt commercially driven, academically focused curricula, and are less likely to receive the resource allocations available to public schools, the barriers to inclusion documented in the public sector may be intensified — or take different forms — within private early childhood settings. This gap underscores the need for qualitative, context-specific research into how private preschool teachers navigate the twin challenges of belief and institutional constraint identified throughout the broader literature.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and setting

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing inclusive education in private preschool settings. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their educational contexts without relying on quantitative measurement.

The study was conducted in two private preschools located in urban areas of Selangor, Malaysia, including one preschool in Port Klang. The Port Klang preschool had an internal Centre of Excellence (COE), which functioned as a support unit to which teachers could refer children requiring additional attention to their developmental needs. The two participating preschools differed in their classroom arrangements and available support for children with special educational needs (SEN), allowing the study to capture experiences across different private preschool contexts. As the study involved only two urban private preschools, the findings are interpreted as context-specific accounts and are not intended to represent all private preschools in Malaysia.

Participants and recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit preschool teachers who had direct experience teaching children with SEN. Teachers were eligible to participate if they had current or recent prior experience teaching children with SEN and provided informed consent. Teachers without such experience, or those who did not consent to participate, were excluded. Previous teaching experience was considered relevant because the study aimed to explore challenges encountered by teachers across different inclusive classroom arrangements rather than limiting participation only to teachers currently teaching children with SEN.

The researchers first approached the management of each preschool and requested assistance in identifying teachers who met the eligibility criteria. Teachers identified as potentially eligible were subsequently invited to participate in the study and were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research before providing consent. Five eligible teachers agreed to participate and were interviewed.

The final sample size was determined by the number of eligible and accessible participants within the two participating preschools rather than by a predetermined numerical target or a formal assessment of thematic saturation. Therefore, the study does not claim that five interviews achieved thematic saturation or captured the full range of experiences among private preschool teachers. Instead, the interviews provided in-depth accounts from a small and clearly defined group of teachers, consistent with the exploratory and context-specific nature of the study.

At the time of the interview, one participant (T5) was teaching in a preschool classroom that did not currently practise inclusive education. However, T5 met the eligibility criteria because the participant had recent prior experience teaching children with SEN. During the analysis, accounts relating to T5's previous teaching experience were distinguished from observations concerning the participant's current classroom context. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the five participants.

Table 1. Background of Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Qualifications
T1	5 years	Bachelor Degree in Psychology
T2	10 years	Bachelor Degree in Multimedia Education
T3	4 years	Bachelor Degree in Counselling
T4	13 years	Diploma in Montessori
T5	6 years	Bachelor Degree in Electrical Engineering

Instrument

To facilitate data collection and address the research objective of exploring the multifaceted challenges faced by teachers in Malaysian private preschools in implementing inclusive education, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed and used as the primary research instrument. The interview questions were formulated based on a review of relevant literature on inclusive education, early childhood education, and the challenges associated with implementing inclusive practices in preschool settings. This process ensured that the questions addressed key areas identified in previous research while remaining aligned with the research objective.

To establish the content validity of the instrument, the interview protocol was reviewed by experts with relevant knowledge and experience in early childhood education, inclusive education, and/or qualitative research. Feedback from the validation process was used to refine the wording, sequence, and focus of the interview questions before the instrument was used for data collection. The semi-structured format also allowed the researcher to use follow-up questions and probes to obtain further clarification and explore participants' experiences in greater depth.

Research Procedure

Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were briefed on the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, and the recording of the sessions. The researcher conducted interviews with the five participants online using the Google Meet platform, with each interview lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interview method enabled the researcher to modify and adapt the questions based on the participants' responses and to explore unexpected but relevant issues in greater depth. Additionally, all interviews were recorded with the participants' consent for transcription purposes.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

One researcher conducted the initial coding by repeatedly listening to the interview recordings and reviewing the transcripts to identify recurring codes and patterns. The resulting codes and candidate themes and subthemes were then presented to the second author for discussion; both researchers reviewed the coding together, compared interpretations, and resolved discrepancies through discussion until agreement was reached on the final themes and subthemes reported in this study. This collaborative review process was intended to enhance the credibility and dependability of the analysis by reducing reliance on a single researcher's individual interpretation. The researchers' academic backgrounds in special education and educational studies respectively informed their interpretation of the data throughout this process.

To enhance credibility, the researchers repeatedly compared the emerging codes and themes with the original interview transcripts to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts. Illustrative quotations were retained in the findings to demonstrate the connection between the themes and the original data. Dependability was supported by maintaining a consistent coding and theme-development process across all interviews and documenting the progression from initial codes to broader themes.

The researchers also recognised that qualitative interpretation may be influenced by their own assumptions and perspectives. Reflexive consideration was therefore used during the analysis by continually reviewing whether emerging interpretations were supported by the participants' accounts rather than by researchers' prior expectations about inclusive education. Given the small sample and context-specific nature of the study, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of these participants rather than statistical or empirical generalisation to Malaysian private preschools as a whole.

FINDINGS

Four overarching themes were identified from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews regarding preschool teachers' perspectives on the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in early education settings. The themes are: (1) teacher experience and professional preparedness, (2) perceived benefits and practical challenges of inclusion, (3) classroom capacity, staffing, and teacher workload, and (4) institutional support and investment. Each theme comprises several related subthemes that reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Table 2 presents an overview of the themes and subthemes identified from the thematic analysis, together with representative participant quotations.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Representative quotation	Participant
1. Teacher Experience and Professional Preparedness	Exposure to SEN teaching	"I have handled special needs children for two years... Autism... some have speech delay... Mild. Mild autism."	T2
		"We have been implementing inclusive education since 2020... we have also received children with ASD, ADHD, and... hearing impairments..."	T4
	Access to specialised training	"Never."	T1
		"We do provide training for teachers... we still top up their early childhood education knowledge and also special education knowledge."	T4
2. Perceived Benefits and Practical Challenges of Inclusion	Socialisation and community integration	"The social development of the autistic child... they can make friends with other typical children."	T2
		"It trains them to move within the community... eventually, they will be integrated into the community, they are not isolated."	T4
	Classroom management and safety concerns	"My concern is what I mentioned earlier, classroom management on my part."	T1
		"If there is an accident involving special children and typical children... not all parents understand."	T3
	Curriculum suitability and participation in routines	"Those children can follow the daily routines... But in terms of the syllabus, it's lacking."	T1
		"When we do inclusive classes, it is only for one hour for academic learning... The rest... they are mixed."	T4
3. Classroom Capacity, Staffing, and Teacher Workload	Class size and teacher-child ratio	"It's hard for me to handle the typical students alongside special needs students... an assistant is needed."	T1
		"One teacher with 10 children... eight typical, two special needs."	T4
	Lack of staffing support	"My class doesn't have one; I am the only one looking after the class."	T1
		"No assistant given."	T2

4. Institutional Support and Investment	Workload and fatigue	“At the end of the day, I feel exhausted with both typical and special children.”	T1
		“Definitely burnt out if you don't understand. But if you know the ‘how’, you can manage it.”	T4
	Training and professional development support	“The government can provide training, like free training for teachers.”	T1
		“I ask for teacher training. Teacher training is very, very necessary.”	T4
	Facilities, infrastructure, and funding	“Facilities like an indoor playground... it would be more helpful.”	T2
		“Providing one-time or recurring grants specifically earmarked for crucial operational needs...”	T5

Theme 1: Teacher Experience and Professional Preparedness

This theme captures differences in teachers' exposure to teaching children with SEN and their access to specialised training. The findings indicate considerable variation among participants, ranging from limited or no direct experience to sustained involvement within a structured inclusive education setting. Similar variation was evident in training opportunities, suggesting that teachers' preparedness to implement inclusive education differs considerably across preschool settings.

Exposure to SEN teaching

Some participants reported only brief encounters with special needs teaching, often limited to a few months and involving mild cases.

Yes, back in 2024, but only for three months... It was a speech delay, but not in the severe speech delay category... Yes, mild. (T1)

Other participants described a more sustained period of exposure, spanning approximately two years, although their experience was still largely confined to mild presentations of autism and related conditions.

I have handled special needs children for two years... Autism... some have speech delay... Mild. Mild autism. (T2)

I was once given the opportunity to teach special needs for about two years...diagnosed with autism... Mild autism. (T3)

In contrast, one participant (T5), who met the study's inclusion criterion through prior experience teaching children with SEN, indicated that the current school setting did not practise inclusive education, as children with special needs were placed in separate classes taught by other educators.

At the current school, never... for autism, we have a class that is special... I don't teach that special class... We don't do inclusive education here. (T5)

Another participant reported long-term and institutionalised exposure to special needs teaching within a formal inclusive education framework, involving a wider range of conditions and levels of severity.

We have been implementing inclusive education since 2020... we have also received children with ASD, ADHD, and... hearing impairments... many with speech delays... we have also taken very severe cases, level three. (T4)

Access to specialised training

Differences in teachers' practical experience were accompanied by considerable variation in access to professional training. Training ranged from a complete absence of specialised preparation to occasional sessions

delivered by occupational therapists and, in one setting, an institutionalised system of continuous professional development.

One participant reported having received no training related to teaching children with special needs.

Never. (T1)

Other participants had attended training conducted by occupational therapists and described such exposure as useful, particularly for managing children's behaviour.

I have, joined... a training with an occupational therapist... it is helpful. (T2)

I did... get like an advisor, training as well from an occupational therapist... every month we would have a monthly meeting (T3)

Training, yes. I joined that with an OT... behaviour... how to handle behaviour. (T5)

In contrast, one participant described a more systematic school-based approach in which teachers were regularly provided with professional development in both early childhood and special education.

We do provide training for teachers... we still top up their early childhood education knowledge and also special education knowledge. (T4)

Theme 2: Perceived Benefits and Practical Challenges of Inclusion

The second theme reflects a tension between teachers' recognition of the social and developmental value of inclusive education and the practical challenges involved in implementing it. Participants highlighted benefits for both children with SEN and typically developing children. At the same time, concerns were raised regarding classroom management, safety, curriculum suitability, and the extent to which children with SEN could participate in different aspects of preschool learning.

Socialisation and community integration

Several participants highlighted that inclusive environments provide opportunities for children with special needs to develop social skills, establish friendships, and become integrated into the wider community.

They will be [able to integrate] more into the community... They can learn how to behave like other typical children. (T1)

The social development of the autistic child... they can make friends with other typical children. (T2)

It can independently develop the social skills of the special needs children and... create generalisation between special children and regular children. (T3)

It trains them to move within the community... eventually, they will be integrated into the community, they are not isolated. (T4)

Participants also recognised that inclusive education may benefit typically developing children by encouraging empathy and acceptance from an early age.

We can teach typical children... empathy. From a young age, children don't choose who to be friends with. (T5)

Classroom management and safety concerns

Despite recognising these benefits, participants expressed concerns about teachers' capacity to manage mixed classrooms, particularly where teachers lacked sufficient experience or preparation.

My concern is what I mentioned earlier, classroom management on my part. (T1)

For new teachers... quite hard to... handle the class because it's mixed... there will be disruptions in class. (T2)

My worry lies with the teachers... when teachers don't have enough education to handle them, it will definitely affect the whole class. (T4)

Safety was another concern, particularly when incidents occurred between children with special needs and typical children and parents did not fully understand the circumstances.

If there is an accident involving special children and typical children... not all parents understand. (T3)

Curriculum suitability and participation in routines

Participants generally perceived daily routines as more manageable for children with special needs than academic or syllabus-based learning.

Those children can follow the daily routines... But in terms of the syllabus, it's lacking. (T1)

There are some who can read, some who can count, and there are also some who can... follow the routines. (T3)

In terms of routines... instill routines first... before we move into writing, reading and mathematics. (T4)

For routines, 100% possible, no problem. (T5)

In contrast, structured academic or syllabus-related activities were identified as more challenging.

Activities involving something like entrepreneurship subjects... it's a bit difficult for special needs children. (T3)

Activities, 50-50, syllabus no, none. (T5)

Some participants described a partial or hybrid form of inclusion in which children with SEN participated alongside typical children during routines and general activities while academic sessions were differentiated or conducted separately.

As for routines, they can follow... Activities too we can invite them to play together... without any problem. (T2)

When we do inclusive classes, it is only for one hour for academic learning... The rest... they are mixed. (T4)

Theme 3: Classroom Capacity, Staffing, and Teacher Workload

The third theme brings together the interrelated operational challenges of class size, staffing provision, and teacher fatigue. Participants' accounts suggest that the feasibility of inclusive education is influenced not only by teachers' individual capabilities but also by the number of children under their care, the availability of additional staff, and the resulting physical and emotional demands placed on teachers.

Class size and teacher-child ratio

Participants indicated that larger classes made it difficult to provide adequate attention to children with special needs while simultaneously supporting typical children.

It's hard for me to handle the typical students alongside special needs students... an assistant is needed. (T1)

16 children in my class with rather limited time constraints... quite difficult for me. (T3)

In contrast, smaller classes or favourable ratios between children with special needs and typical children were perceived as making inclusive teaching more manageable.

Around one to two students... less than 10, maybe around five, six. (T2)

One teacher with 10 children. So out of these 10 children, there will definitely be two special needs children. So, eight typical, two special needs. (T4)

Lack of staffing support

The effect of class size was closely related to staffing provision. Most participants reported having no dedicated SEN assistant or additional support staff and therefore carried primary responsibility for managing the entire classroom.

My class doesn't have one; I am the only one looking after the class. (T1)

No assistant given. (T2)

None. (T3)

No, no. So, it is indeed just me alone. (T4)

Workload and fatigue

The demands associated with class composition and limited staffing were also reflected in participants' experiences of fatigue. Several participants described increased exhaustion when managing both typical and special needs children.

At the end of the day, I feel exhausted with both typical and special children. (T1)

It will feel more tiring compared to us teaching a typical class. (T2)

It's a bit exhausting... the teacher has to be extra careful. (T3)

However, fatigue was not experienced uniformly. One participant regarded the level of tiredness as generally similar, except when a child with special needs was experiencing a particularly difficult day.

Just the same... unless there are days when the special needs child is not in a very good condition. (T5)

Another participant associated teacher burnout more closely with insufficient knowledge and skills than with the presence of children with special needs itself.

Definitely burnt out if you don't understand. But if you know the 'how', you can manage it. (T4)

Theme 4: Institutional Support and Investment

The final theme reflects participants' recommendations concerning the broader institutional conditions required to strengthen inclusive education in private preschools. Participants emphasised the importance of greater investment in teacher development, physical facilities, and dedicated financial support.

Training and professional development support

Participants called for greater government involvement in providing accessible and affordable professional training for preschool teachers.

The government can provide training, like free training for teachers. (T1)

I ask for teacher training. Teacher training is very, very necessary. (T4)

Facilities, infrastructure, and funding

Participants also emphasised the importance of improving physical facilities and providing financial resources that could support the practical requirements of inclusive education.

Facilities like an indoor playground... it would be more helpful. (T2)

Assistance in terms of facilities or location... it would be even better. (T3)

Providing one-time or recurring grants specifically earmarked for crucial operational needs, such as building safety upgrades, playground maintenance, or updating classroom technology. (T5)

DISCUSSION

This study provides a context-specific account of how inclusive education is experienced by teachers in two Malaysian private preschools. While previous Malaysian research has identified teacher preparedness, limited resources, workload, and institutional support as important challenges in inclusive education, much of this evidence has come from public or formally supported educational settings. The present study contributes to this literature by showing how these challenges may take different forms within private preschools, where support arrangements, access to specialised training, staffing, and approaches to inclusion can vary considerably between institutions.

One important contribution concerns the uneven nature of teachers' professional preparation. Participants ranged from having limited exposure to children with SEN to working in a preschool with a more established inclusive system and regular professional development. Previous Malaysian studies have already highlighted insufficient preparation and the need for greater exposure to special needs education and structured mentoring (Abu Bakar & Nordin, 2024; Samsuddin & Mustafa, 2025). The present findings add to this evidence by suggesting that, within private preschool settings, teacher preparedness may depend strongly on the practices and resources of individual institutions. This means that teachers working in the same sector may have very different opportunities to develop knowledge and confidence in supporting children with SEN.

The findings also extend existing discussion about teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Participants generally recognised the social value of inclusive education, particularly opportunities for children with SEN to interact with typically developing peers and participate more fully in the wider community. At the same time, they expressed concerns about classroom management, safety, and their own ability to manage mixed classrooms. This supports previous research showing that positive attitudes towards inclusion do not necessarily result in confidence in implementing inclusive practices (Kazmi et al., 2023; Ibrahim & Pang, 2023). However, the present study adds a private-preschool perspective by illustrating how positive views of inclusion may coexist with practical concerns when teachers have limited training, staffing support, or experience. The issue therefore appears to involve not only teachers' willingness to include children with SEN, but also whether the preschool provides conditions that allow teachers to put inclusive values into practice.

A further contribution relates to the distinction between participation in daily routines and participation in academic learning. Participants generally viewed routines and general classroom activities as more manageable for children with SEN, whereas structured academic or syllabus-based activities were considered more difficult. Some participants described arrangements in which children with SEN joined their peers for routines and general activities but received different or separate provision during academic learning. This finding develops the discussion beyond whether a child is simply present in a mainstream classroom. Tseng (2021) distinguishes routine-based adaptations from changes to instructional content, while Supermaniam and Hamdan (2025) highlight the difficulties created by inflexible curricula. The present findings suggest that, in private preschool contexts, inclusion may occur at different levels: children may be socially included in routines and activities while having more limited participation in academic learning. This highlights the importance of considering the

quality and extent of participation, rather than treating inclusion as a simple distinction between being included or excluded.

Class size, staffing, and teacher workload were also closely connected rather than operating as separate challenges. Participants described difficulties providing sufficient attention to both children with SEN and typically developing children when classes were larger or when no additional support staff were available. Most participants reported having no dedicated SEN assistant, and several linked these conditions to greater fatigue. Previous research has similarly identified smaller classes and teaching assistants as important supports for inclusive education (Chow et al., 2024), while Benigno et al. (2025) links burnout to both individual and workplace factors. The contribution of the present study is to show how these factors interact within private preschool classrooms. Teacher workload cannot be understood only as an individual issue; it is also shaped by class composition, staffing arrangements, and teachers' knowledge of how to respond to children with different needs. This is supported by the contrasting participant accounts, particularly the view that burnout may be reduced when teachers have sufficient knowledge and strategies.

The variation between the two preschool contexts also provides insight into the role of institutional support. Participants' experiences ranged from having little specialised assistance to working within a setting that provided more systematic professional development and support for SEN provision. This variation suggests that private preschool inclusion is not implemented uniformly. Institutional decisions regarding training, staffing, facilities, and resource allocation may substantially influence what teachers are able to provide in their classrooms. Participants' calls for greater training, facilities, and financial support further indicate that responsibility for inclusion should not rest entirely on individual teachers. This supports Supermaniam and Hamdan's (2025) argument that inclusive education requires coordinated institutional support, but the present study extends this issue specifically to private preschool settings, where access to such resources may depend more heavily on individual providers.

Overall, this study contributes to the Malaysian literature by providing a small-scale qualitative account of inclusive education within private preschool settings, an area that has received less attention than public education. Rather than identifying entirely new barriers, the findings show how established challenges—teacher preparation, curriculum flexibility, staffing, workload, and institutional support—interact within private preschool contexts. Importantly, the study also shows that inclusive practice may vary substantially between private preschools depending on their internal support systems and available resources. These findings suggest that efforts to strengthen inclusive education in the private preschool sector should consider not only teacher training, but also the organisational conditions that enable teachers to apply inclusive practices effectively.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The study involved only five teachers from two private preschools in urban Selangor. The number of participants was based on the eligible teachers available at the participating preschools rather than on a formal assessment of thematic saturation. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the experiences of this small group and may not represent private preschool teachers in other parts of Malaysia.

Another limitation concerns the use of self-reported data from semi-structured interviews. Participants' responses may have been influenced by personal perceptions or by the tendency to present their practices in a positive manner. The study also did not include classroom observations or other data sources that could be used to compare with the interview findings.

The limited geographical scope should also be considered. Both participating preschools were located in urban settings and differed in their support arrangements for children with SEN. As a result, the findings may not reflect the experiences of teachers in rural preschools or in private preschools with different levels of resources and institutional support.

A further limitation is that the study captured teachers' experiences at only one point in time. It therefore cannot show how their confidence, workload, challenges, or support needs may change over time.

Future research could involve teachers from a wider range of private preschools across different Malaysian states and from both urban and rural areas. Combining interviews with classroom observations or surveys may also provide a broader understanding of inclusive practices. Including preschool administrators, parents, and other support professionals could offer additional perspectives on the challenges and support needed for inclusive education. Longitudinal studies may further help explain how teachers' experiences and preparedness develop over time.

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