

Beyond the Façade of Inclusion: Rethinking Special and Inclusive Education Models

Hajar Ouknider

Higher School of Technology, Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco

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ABSTRACT

Globally, the push for the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in mainstream classrooms has been increasingly promoted. This is justified by it being an educational, social, and human right. While, from afar, inclusion looks beneficial, practitioners question its implementation, effectiveness, and appropriateness for all learners. This qualitative study explores how special education teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals perceive special and inclusive education in practice. Using open-ended interviews with 12 stakeholders in a Southeastern United States public middle school, the study explores participants' perspectives on full inclusion, the challenges that hinder its success, and the alternatives they believe would better support SWDs. Findings reveal participants' support for inclusion in principle but strong reservations regarding the one-size-fits-all approach that disregards individual student needs. Participants emphasized the importance of flexibility, individualized instruction, accurate diagnosis, teacher training, and the continued existence of self-contained classrooms. Drawing on Hornby's (2015) concept of "inclusive special education," the paper calls for a balanced framework that integrates the complementary strengths of both educational models.

Keywords: inclusive education, special education, disability, self-contained classrooms, individualized instruction

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become one of the dominant paradigms that shape educational discourse worldwide. International organizations, policymakers, and educational institutions increasingly advocate for the inclusion of all students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Inclusion is frequently presented not only as a pedagogical approach but especially as moral and human rights. Through this lens, separate educational settings are often criticized for reinforcing exclusion and inequality.

In defining the word 'inclusion', it is said that it is a generalized term that has been emptied of meaning, and also a concept that has been repeated and reduced to a slogan, a cliché that is sort of mandated in the discourse of "right-thinking people". (Allan 1999; Slee, 2003; Benjamin, 2002; Thomas & Loxley, 2001; Thomas & O'Hanlon, 2001 as cited in Dunne, 2009, pp. 43-44). Despite the widespread acceptance of inclusion as an educational goal, the realities of classroom practices reveal persistent tensions. Thus, it is noteworthy to question whether full inclusion adequately serves all SWDs, particularly those with severe cognitive, behavioral, or emotional needs. Kauffman et al. (2017) argued that the ideological momentum behind full inclusion has outpaced the empirical evidence for its effectiveness, which leaves practitioners in a difficult position when student needs do not align with policy 'prescriptions.' A further layer of complexity is introduced when we juxtapose physical placement and genuine educational participation. Cooper and Jacobs (2011) caution that merely relocating SWDs in mainstream classrooms does not guarantee belonging; instead, it may mask subtler forms of exclusion: students can remain socially isolated and academically unsupported despite being physically present in general education classrooms.

This study emerges from these tensions. Rather than approaching inclusion as an unquestioned ideal, it investigates how educational practitioners working directly with SWDs perceive both special education and inclusive education. By examining the experiences and perspectives of special education teachers,

paraprofessionals, and administrators, the study aims to contribute a practitioner-centered voice to ongoing debates surrounding the future of inclusive education.

The study seeks to answer the following question: **How do special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators perceive special education and inclusive education, and what do their experiences suggest about effective service delivery for students with disabilities?**

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design. It used open-ended, semi-structured interviews to explore participants' perspectives on inclusion and special education. Qualitative methods were chosen for their ability to allow researchers to study things “in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44).

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in a public middle school located in the Southeastern United States. Twelve in-service educational stakeholders participated through stratified purposeful sampling, a strategy that ensures representation across different professional roles (Patton, 2015). Participants were divided equally into three categories:

- Four special education teachers
- Four paraprofessionals
- Four administrators

Participants' years of professional experience ranged from three to twenty-two years, which provides a range of generational and contextual perspectives.

Instruments and Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant. It is important to note that this study is part of a Ph.D. project that explored the participants' practices of inclusive education in the United States. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on their understandings of inclusion and special education, their experiences of implementation, and their views on effective support for students with disabilities. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' prior consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. One interview question was isolated across all twelve participants to facilitate systematic cross-case thematic comparison. Member checking was employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Formal institutional review board approval was not obtained, as the researcher was not affiliated with an institution requiring such review at the time of the study. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the school principal. All participants received written information about the study and signed informed consent forms before their interviews, which included consent to audio recording. Participation was voluntary, and all

data were anonymized, with pseudonyms used and identifying details removed to protect participants' confidentiality.

RESULTS

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) reserved support for inclusion; (2) resistance to one-size-fits-all approaches; (3) hindering factors to successful inclusion; and (4) concerns about forced full inclusion outcomes. Each theme is presented below with illustrative participant quotations.

Reserved Support for Inclusion

Participants generally supported the idea of inclusion as a guiding principle; however, nearly all expressed reservations regarding full inclusion for every student with disabilities. Their responses consistently started with a positive confirmation for inclusion; however, a 'but' always followed. All their answers emphasized the importance of individualization. Several participants noted that inclusion "might not be the best" for some students or that it "would only benefit some of them." Others expressed concern that particular students require smaller instructional settings or additional support that general education classrooms cannot adequately provide.

Representative participant statements included:

"General education is not the best for everybody and for everything."

"There always has to be self-contained classrooms."

These responses reveal a meaningful distinction between endorsing inclusion as a philosophy and full inclusion as a universal placement model.

Resistance to One-Size-Fits-All Approaches

A recurring theme was resistance to rigid, policy-driven placement models. Participants feared that escalating institutional pressure toward full inclusion could eliminate important specialized services. One administrator expressed this concern directly:

"My fear is that they're going to do away with self-contained classrooms and put them in general classrooms without the support they need."

Another participant described one-size-fits-all inclusion as "frustrating," particularly when students require individualized instructional approaches that cannot feasibly be delivered in mainstream classrooms. She said, "The one-size-fits-all can be frustrating." These findings suggest that practitioners prioritize flexibility over ideological consistency. They view student-centered decision-making as non-negotiable.

Hindering Factors to Successful Inclusion

Participants identified several categories of factors that complicate the implementation of full inclusion. These include factors related to the students, teachers, and management. Student-related factors included the severity of disability, behavioral challenges, and academic functioning level. Participants argued that some students function more effectively in smaller, more structured environments where instruction can be adapted with greater precision. One participant said:

"They are just more comfortable in a small classroom, and their cognitive abilities are much more suited to a smaller classroom."

Teacher attitudes and preparedness were also identified as barriers. Several participants described general education teachers as resistant or not trained to work effectively with SWDs. Remarkably, a generational pattern emerged: younger teachers were perceived as more open to inclusion than veteran colleagues. A participant noted, "There are some teachers who are old-school and just don't want the kids in their class." Another one

said, “Some of the older teachers don’t want them in their class [...] but a lot of younger teachers who have come in are more accepting.”

Management challenges include large class sizes, inadequate diagnostic practices, and insufficient institutional support. These further complicate inclusion efforts. One participant criticized placement decisions made "without a lot of data or information," which raises concerns regarding the extent to which attention is directed towards providing inclusion where the student receives meaningful education, or they are simply “physically” included.

Concerns About Forced Full Inclusion Outcomes

Participants articulated concerns about the downstream consequences of mandating full inclusion regardless of individual student circumstances. Some worried that students with disabilities might paradoxically experience more profound exclusion within ‘ostensibly’ inclusive classrooms, where their academic and social needs remain unaddressed. Others raised concerns about the impact on students without disabilities. They explained that when teachers are stretched beyond their capacity to differentiate instruction for SWDs, the students without disabilities may feel isolated as well in the process. One participant articulated this saying: "Sometimes I feel that the least restrictive environment for special needs students is more restrictive for the other students that are around."

At the same time, participants acknowledged the social and academic benefits of special education for all students, even those without disabilities. One participant noted, “I think the SPED(special education) ways of teaching and accommodating are gonna swing towards more of the general education students.” Another one said, “I think all of our kids can get something out of it.” This reinforces the idea that when students’ needs are put at the center of the classroom, and appropriate support accompanies placement, all of them will truly feel and be included. These nuanced responses indicate that practitioners do not categorically reject inclusion; rather, they reject inflexible applications that overlook practical realities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a challenge often mentioned in the literature: balancing inclusion as a right for all students with inclusion as an effective educational practice. Participants’ conditional support for inclusion mirrors the position articulated by Warnock (2005), who argued that “what is my right to have...may not necessarily be what is best for me as a schoolchild”. It also echoes Hornby and Kauffman (2021), who contend that inclusive education is appropriate for many children with disabilities but not all of them, and that framing the choice as all or none of students with disabilities in general education classrooms actually precludes, rather than advances, social justice in education. The present findings reinforce this distinction and add a practitioner-level layer to it: the professionals closest to SWDs consistently prioritized individualized fit over simple physical placement.

The resistance to one-size-fits-all approaches is consistent with Kauffman and Hallahan’s (2005) argument that effective special education requires a continuum of placement options. The participants’ accounts suggest that collapsing this continuum in the name of inclusion does not eliminate exclusion, but it relocates it. Students who cannot meaningfully access the general education curriculum without intensive, individualized support may experience greater marginalization when placed in settings not designed for their needs, a situation that Cooper and Jacobs (2011) describe as “the most dishonest and insidious form of exclusion” (p. 17). This tension is sharpened by Fuchs et al. (2025), who reviewed 50 years of research on the placement of SWDs. They argue that an important distinction must be made between where students are taught and how they are taught. Their review found that evidence about the best educational setting for SWDs remains inconclusive because many studies have methodological limitations and selection bias. In contrast, evidence about effective teaching methods is much stronger. Research consistently shows that intensive instruction, provided in small groups or one-to-one settings, can significantly improve student outcomes. Much of this instruction takes place outside the general classroom, which suggests that a strict commitment to full inclusion may limit access to the types of support that are most effective for some students.

Participants' fears about the elimination of self-contained classrooms must also be understood within the broader policy climate. Hornby and Kauffman (2023) characterize the most influential claims advanced by proponents of full inclusion as "zombies", which are ideas that persist despite contradictory evidence. They distinguish three inclusion zombies, and these are that full inclusion was recommended by the Salamanca Framework; that full inclusion is a feasible approach to meeting all special needs; and that there is convincing research evidence that inclusion is more effective than special education. They stress that all three zombies are false but still widely disseminated. The administrator in this study who feared that policymakers are "going to do away with self-contained classrooms" was thus responding to a real and documented policy trajectory, one in which, as Hornby and Kauffman (2021) note, the theories underpinning inclusive education have at times been used to justify closing special schools and classes and reducing support for students with disabilities. The practitioner skepticism documented in this study can therefore be read not as resistance to inclusion per se, but as a grounded appraisal of claims that have outrun their evidence base.

The concerns about diagnostic adequacy reflect findings by Wilcox et al. (2021), who emphasized that evidence-based, data-driven decision-making is a prerequisite for effective inclusive education. When placement decisions are made without solid data, the risk of misalignment between student need and educational environment increases substantially.

Taken together, the findings align closely with Hornby's (2015) concept of "inclusive special education", a framework that rejects the binary opposition between inclusion and special education and supports the idea of a flexible, needs-responsive continuum. As Hornby defines it, inclusive special education involves providing the best possible instruction for all children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, in the most appropriate setting, throughout all stages of a child's education, to achieve the highest possible level of inclusion in the community post-school (p. 207). This framing allows educators to honor the social and moral aspirations of inclusion while maintaining the individualized, intensive instruction that special education makes possible. Notably, Hornby and Kauffman (2021) explicitly endorse the continued implementation of inclusive special education, arguing that high-quality instruction, not placement, should be the primary concern of all educators, and that such instruction can happen often, but not always, in regular classrooms in neighborhood schools. This position maps almost exactly onto the views expressed by the practitioners in the present study.

The findings also have implications for teacher preparation. If general education teachers are to function as meaningful partners in inclusive settings, pre-service and in-service training must extend beyond attitudinal change to encompass practical competencies such as differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), behavioral support strategies, and collaborative consultation with special educators. Without this investment, inclusion risks becoming a structural arrangement rather than a genuinely inclusive educational experience. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that not all proposed reforms to general education carry equivalent evidentiary weight. Fuchs et al. (2025) note that UDL, despite its broad institutional appeal and aggressive promotion, currently lacks strong empirical support for improving the academic performance of SWDs. Despite the attractiveness of the term 'inclusion', it should not be a camouflage if, in reality, quality education and students' needs cannot be provided and met in an inclusive setting.

This study is limited by its single-site design and small sample. The perspectives represented are those of practitioners in one Southeastern U.S. middle school, and findings may not generalize to other geographic, cultural, or institutional contexts. Future research should employ larger, multi-site samples and incorporate students' and parents' perspectives, which are largely absent from the current study but are critical to a complete understanding of inclusive education in practice.

CONCLUSION

The constant push for 'inclusion' in education has made it desirable by many educational systems around the world that want to be 'righteous' towards SWDs. This study has shown that practitioners working directly with students with disabilities are for inclusion, but with reservations. Participants do not oppose, but support inclusion as a value while consistently arguing that not all students benefit equally from mainstream placements. They have also rightfully pointed out that forcing inclusion without individualized support may generate new forms of exclusion.

The study's findings call for educational systems to move beyond simplistic binaries between inclusion and special education. Schools should instead adopt flexible, individualized frameworks that place students' learning needs at the center of placement and service delivery decisions. Hornby's (2015) inclusive special education model offers one such framework, one that combines the social aspirations of inclusive education with the instructional precision of special education. Education systems around the world must be careful with their use of inclusion lest it leads to further exclusion for both students with disabilities and those without it. It is true that the word 'inclusion' shines from afar, but one must remember that not everything that glitters is gold.

Future research may examine students' and parents' perceptions of inclusion, investigate how specific structural supports moderate inclusion outcomes, and test the practical applicability of the inclusive special education framework across diverse school contexts.

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Author Declaration

The author confirms that this work is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not under review by any other journal. No conflicts of interest exist in relation to this manuscript.

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