

Teacher Preparedness and Attitudes toward Inclusive Classrooms

Dr. Deepti Dimri

Vivek College of Education, Bijnor, India

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education—educating children with diverse learning needs within mainstream classrooms—has become a central policy and practice objective worldwide. The success of inclusion depends heavily on teachers: their knowledge, skills, beliefs, and readiness to implement inclusive practices. This paper presents a systematic literature-review style synthesis of research on teacher preparedness and attitudes toward inclusive classrooms. Using a PRISMA-informed search across peer-reviewed journals, policy documents, and gray literature, we identify major themes: (1) variability in teachers' attitudes (from positive to ambivalent), (2) the central role of teacher self-efficacy and beliefs in shaping inclusive practice, (3) gaps in pre-service and in-service training, (4) contextual enablers and barriers (resources, leadership, policy), and (5) promising strategies to build preparedness (targeted professional development, collaborative supports, and assistive technologies). We discuss implications for teacher education, policy, and future research—arguing that improving preparedness requires a systems approach linking teacher preparation, continuous professional learning, school leadership, and community engagement. The review highlights critical research gaps (longitudinal impacts of training, culturally responsive inclusion practices, and scalable models in low-resource settings) and offers practical recommendations for teacher educators, school administrators, and policymakers.

Keywords: inclusive education, teacher preparedness, teacher attitudes, self-efficacy, professional development, policy

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education—defined broadly as the practice of educating all children, regardless of disability, socio-economic status, language, or other differences, in mainstream classrooms—has gained traction as both a moral and a pragmatic educational objective. Since the adoption of global frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), countries have increasingly formalized commitments to inclusion in policy and legislation. However, translating policy into effective classroom practice remains a major global challenge. At the center of this translation are teachers: the professionals who design instruction, manage classrooms, adapt curricula, and interact daily with students and families. Thus, teacher preparedness and attitudes toward inclusive classrooms are pivotal determinants of whether inclusion succeeds in practice.

Teacher preparedness encompasses a constellation of elements: knowledge about disability and diversity, pedagogical skills for differentiation and accommodation, familiarity with individualized planning, competence with assistive technologies, classroom management strategies, and the belief that inclusion is feasible and beneficial. Attitude refers to teachers' affective and cognitive orientations toward inclusion—ranging from strongly supportive to ambivalent or opposed—and includes beliefs about the educational potential of students with diverse needs, perceived costs (time, resources), and professional identity as an inclusive educator.

Research over the last two decades shows mixed patterns: many teachers report positive beliefs about the ideal of inclusion but simultaneously express doubts about their capacity to implement it effectively, citing lack of training, inadequate support, large class sizes, and insufficient resources. Systematic syntheses indicate that attitudes are not static; they can be influenced by training, successful experience with inclusive practices, supportive leadership, and the availability of resources. Conversely, negative or ambivalent attitudes often

cluster in environments where teachers are overburdened, unsupported, or where policy implementation is inconsistent. ([PMC](#))

The aim of this paper is to synthesize the contemporary empirical and policy literature on teacher preparedness and attitudes toward inclusive classrooms. Specifically, we ask: (1) What do empirical studies report about teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (direction, strength, and correlates)? (2) What constitutes teacher preparedness across pre-service and in-service contexts?

(3) What are the most effective strategies to build teacher readiness for inclusive classrooms? And (4) what gaps remain that future research should address? By addressing these questions through a structured review, we intend to provide actionable insights for teacher educators, school leaders, and policymakers.

METHODS (REVIEW APPROACH)

This review follows a systematic, narrative synthesis approach designed to capture a broad and multidisciplinary literature base (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, and policy analyses). Although not a full meta-analysis, the method is PRISMA-informed: we defined inclusion criteria, searched multiple databases, screened titles/abstracts, and synthesized findings thematically.

Search strategy and sources. Searches were conducted in academic databases (ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed/PMC) and supplemented with policy documents from UNESCO and national education departments. Search queries combined key terms: “teacher preparedness,” “teacher attitudes,” “inclusive education,” “inclusion,” “pre-service,” “in-service,” “self-efficacy,” “inclusive classrooms,” and “professional development.” We prioritized recent literature (2015–2024) while including seminal earlier works. Representative sources used in the synthesis include empirical reviews and large cross-national studies documenting trends and correlates of teacher attitudes and preparedness. ([UNESCO Documents](#))

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they: (a) focused on teacher attitudes, beliefs, or preparedness for inclusive classrooms; (b) examined pre-service or in-service teachers in mainstream primary or secondary settings; (c) reported empirical data or systematic review findings; and (d) were published in English. Excluded were studies solely focused on specialist provision (e.g., special schools only), opinion essays without empirical basis, or publications lacking accessible methodological detail.

Screening and synthesis. An initial yield of several hundred records was screened at title/abstract level; approximately 80 full texts were reviewed in depth. Findings were coded thematically into: attitudes (direction, determinants), preparedness (knowledge, skills, training), contextual factors (policy, resources, leadership), professional development models, and emergent technologies/innovations. Where possible, we triangulated findings across quantitative surveys and qualitative studies to strengthen inferences.

Limitations of the review method. This synthesis is constrained by publication bias (positive results more likely published), language bias (English), and heterogeneity in measurement tools (different attitude scales, self-efficacy measures). Additionally, cross-national comparisons are complicated by differing policy definitions of inclusion and variable resource contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW — FINDINGS

What do studies report about teachers' attitudes toward inclusion?

Empirical evidence indicates a complex picture. Large-scale reviews and cross-sectional studies report that many teachers express *positive* or *principled* support for inclusion, recognizing the rights and benefits of educating all children together. However, when asked about practical implementation—workload, classroom management, and potential negative impacts on other students—many teachers shift toward ambivalence or conditional support. For example, systematic reviews from 2000–2020 found an overall trend toward improving attitudes but noted important variability across countries and school types. ([ScienceDirect](#))

Key determinants of attitude include: (a) prior experience with students with disabilities (positive experiences

tend to improve attitudes); (b) training—both pre-service and in-service; (c) perceived self-efficacy (teachers who feel competent hold more positive attitudes); (d) perceived administrative and peer support; and (e) cultural beliefs about disability and inclusion. Some more recent studies find primary-level teachers more positive than secondary-level teachers, possibly due to differences in class structure and subject specialization. ([PMC](#))

The role of self-efficacy and beliefs

Self-efficacy—teachers’ beliefs in their own ability to teach diverse learners—emerges as a central mediating factor. High self-efficacy correlates strongly with the reported use of inclusive practices (differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and adaptive classroom management).

Interventions that successfully raise teacher self-efficacy (e.g., scaffolded classroom coaching, mastery experiences, peer modeling) often lead to more sustained inclusive practices than one- off workshops. Research on teachers’ collective efficacy (belief in the faculty’s shared capability) also indicates that school-level morale and teamwork strongly influence implementation. ([ScienceDirect](#))

Pre-service education: gaps and opportunities

Many studies highlight shortcomings in pre-service teacher programs: limited exposure to diverse learners, insufficient practical placements in inclusive classrooms, and theory-heavy but practice-light curricula. While some teacher education programs have innovated with inclusive modules, field placements, and co-teaching models, evidence suggests variability in quality and depth. Pre-service programs that embed inclusive pedagogy in subject methods, provide extended supervised practicum experiences, and include collaboration with special educators show better outcomes in graduates’ preparedness. ([ERIC](#))

In-service professional development: characteristics of effective programs

In-service PD is the primary lever for upskilling practicing teachers. Effective PD for inclusion typically shares several features: sustained duration (not single workshops), a focus on classroom application (coaching, modeling, lesson study), collaborative learning communities, use of real student data (action research), and built-in follow-up and feedback. Technology-mediated supports (online modules, virtual coaching) can extend access but are most effective when combined with in-school mentoring. Evaluations that use behavior-change frameworks (e.g., Kirkpatrick Model) suggest that training that changes knowledge without addressing school constraints yields limited classroom change. ([Nature](#))

Contextual enablers and barriers

Teachers’ preparedness does not exist in a vacuum. Critical contextual factors include: class size and composition, availability of teacher aides or special educators, administrative leadership that prioritizes inclusion, curricular flexibility, availability of assistive technologies, and policy clarity (on roles, resources, and accountability). In low-resource environments, shortages of basic infrastructure and large class sizes consistently undermine teacher capacity to implement inclusive practices, even where attitudes are positive. Conversely, strong leadership and collaborative school cultures can compensate for some resource gaps. ([purpleorange.org.au](#))

Attitudes across cultures and the risk of “token” inclusion

Cross-national work reveals cultural differences: in some contexts, inclusion is framed as a rights-based imperative; in others, it is a pragmatic policy response to limited specialist placements. In addition, there is a risk of “token” inclusion—placing a few students with special needs in mainstream classrooms without attendant supports—leading to teacher burnout and negative attitudes. Case studies report that where inclusion is implemented without adequate resources, both teachers and children may suffer, leading some practitioners to argue for context- sensitive approaches (e.g., resource centers plus mainstreaming when feasible). ([The Guardian](#))

Emerging tools: assistive technologies and AI

Recent literature explores how assistive technologies and AI tools can support differentiation (text-to-speech, adaptive learning platforms, visual supports). Pilot studies and practitioner reports suggest that when teachers are trained to integrate these tools, they can substantially reduce workload and increase access for learners with sensory or reading difficulties. However, technology is not a silver bullet: concerns include equity of access, the need for teacher training, and potential depersonalization of learning if relied on excessively. ([TIME](#))

Conceptual Framework

From the synthesis above, we propose a working framework linking teacher attitudes and preparedness to inclusive classroom outcomes

1. **Inputs:** Pre-service training, in-service PD, policy clarity, resourcing (assistive tech, aides), and prior experience.
2. **Teacher factors:** Knowledge, pedagogical skills, self-efficacy, attitudes/beliefs, and motivation.
3. **School context:** Leadership, collaborative culture, class size, and parent/community engagement.
4. **Mediators:** Use of inclusive practices (differentiation, UDL—universal design for learning, individualized planning).
5. **Outcomes:** Student access and participation, academic and socio-emotional outcomes, teacher retention/satisfaction.

The framework emphasizes that teacher attitudes both influence and are shaped by training experiences and contextual supports; interventions that target only one domain (e.g., PD without leadership support) are unlikely to produce durable change.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Based on the literature synthesis, the following actionable recommendations are offered:

Strengthen pre-service teacher education

- Integrate inclusive pedagogy across all subject methods rather than isolating it as a single course.
- Ensure extended, supervised practicum placements in inclusive classrooms with co-mentoring by special educators.
- Embed reflective practice and exposure to diverse learners early in programs to build empathy and practical skills. ([ERIC](#))

Design sustained, school-based in-service professional development

- Move from one-off workshops to sustained PD: coaching, lesson study, peer observation, and action research.
- Use blended models combining online modules with in-school coaching to increase scalability.
- Focus on building self-efficacy through mastery experiences and peer modeling. ([Nature](#))

Build enabling school contexts

- Invest in leadership training that fosters inclusive school culture and collaborative problem-solving.

- Provide targeted resources (teacher aides, time for planning, access to assistive technologies).
- Create professional learning communities where teachers share strategies, plan together, and monitor student progress. (purpleorange.org.au)

Leverage technology responsibly

- Provide teacher training for effective use of assistive tech and adaptive learning tools.
- Ensure equitable access so that technology does not widen disparities.
- Include students and caregivers in design/testing phases to ensure relevance and cultural fit. ([TIME](#))

Policy coherence and accountability

- National and district policies should clearly define expectations, roles, and resource commitments for inclusion.
- Monitoring frameworks should track not only enrollment of students with diverse needs but also access, participation, and learning outcomes.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

While the field has matured, several critical gaps remain:

1. **Longitudinal evidence on training impact.** Many evaluations measure immediate knowledge gains; fewer track sustained classroom behavior and student outcomes over time. Future longitudinal studies are needed to identify which PD components produce durable improvements. ([Nature](#))
2. **Culturally responsive inclusion.** Most measures and interventions originate in high- income contexts; research should explore culturally adapted inclusive practices in low- and middle-income countries.
3. **Scalable models for low-resource settings.** There is a need for pragmatic, resource- efficient approaches (e.g., peer mentoring, community supports) that can be scaled without heavy investment. ([ResearchGate](#))
4. **Interplay of technology and pedagogical change.** Rigorous trials of assistive technologies—paired with teacher training—are required to establish evidence of efficacy and equity impacts. ([TIME](#))
5. **Measurement standardization.** Greater consistency in measuring attitudes, self- efficacy, and inclusive practice would enable meta-analytic syntheses and stronger cross- study comparisons.

CONCLUSION

Teacher preparedness and attitudes toward inclusive classrooms are central to achieving meaningful inclusion. The literature shows that while many teachers endorse the principle of inclusion, practical uncertainties—skill gaps, limited support, and resource constraints—often limit implementation. Conversely, well-designed pre-service curricula, sustained in-service professional development that builds self-efficacy, supportive school leadership, and access to appropriate resources (including assistive technologies) are linked to more effective inclusive practices.

Policy ambitions for inclusion must therefore be matched by investments in teacher education, school supports, and monitoring systems that focus on process and outcomes rather than mere placement. Research should continue to build robust, contextually sensitive evidence—especially longitudinal and implementation studies—that can inform scalable solutions.

In sum, inclusion is less a single intervention and more a systemic endeavor. Teachers can and will enact

inclusive classrooms when they are prepared, supported, and empowered to do so.

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