



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: CHALLENGES, TEACHER PERSPECTIVES, AND BEST PRACTICES

Marcelino T. Pesigan Jr PhD
Bernalillo Public School, NM, USA

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education represents a worldwide commitment to ensuring that every learner – regardless of ability or disability – has equal access to quality learning experiences. This paper examines the evolution of inclusive practices, the challenges faced in implementing them, and the perspectives of teachers, particularly those in Special Education roles. Major barriers involve insufficient teacher training, constrained educational resources, systemic limitations, and lingering negative attitudes among educators and families. Drawing on literature and personal teaching experiences, the paper highlights strategies and best practices that enable successful inclusion, including professional development, collaborative teaching, supportive leadership, and family engagement. The findings highlight that inclusive education must go beyond policy statements, emphasizing evidence-based practices that promote teamwork, respect, and a collective commitment to each learner's success. True inclusion extends beyond placing students in general classrooms; it involves nurturing an environment where every learner is respected, supported, and empowered to realize their potential.

KEYWORDS: *Inclusive Education, Special Education, Teacher Perspectives, Collaborative Teaching, Educational Equity*

GLOBAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

With current global trends in educational reform, inclusive education is increasingly implemented across many countries. More parents of children with exceptional needs are recognizing the benefits of formal schooling. Decades ago, children with disabilities were often excluded from mainstream education due to stigma and social pressures. Over the years, the language and philosophy surrounding educational support have transformed—from *special education* toward *inclusive education*—reflecting a broader, equity-driven vision that values diversity and participation for every learner (see, e.g., Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]; UNESCO 2020).

INTRODUCTION

Decades ago, terms such as ADHD, dyscalculia, or autism were rarely part of everyday vocabulary, and few educators or parents understood that children might learn in fundamentally different ways. In classrooms, teachers often relied on simplistic labels—calling students “slow learners” or “stupid”—without understanding the reasons behind these differences. As a child, I remember noticing visible physical differences in some students, such as those with Down syndrome, and assuming that everyone else fit a so-called “normal” standard. At the time, no one explained why some children struggled to read, calculate, or pay attention, and what we now recognize as neurodiversity was largely invisible.

Research over recent decades has reshaped our understanding of learning differences. Neurodevelopmental studies show that conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, and autism are linked to variations in brain structure and function, influencing attention, memory, and information processing (American Psychiatric

Association, 2013; Shaywitz, 2003). These neurological differences are not reflections of laziness or low intelligence. Similarly, educational research demonstrates that children have diverse cognitive strengths and learning styles. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983) and Tomlinson's (2014) work on differentiated instruction reveal that traditional measures of “academic ability” capture only a narrow part of a child's potential.

Historically, educational systems marginalized children who did not fit normative expectations. In the mid-20th century, students with learning differences were frequently segregated or institutionalized, reinforcing misunderstandings about ability and intelligence. Reflecting on my own experiences, I can see how unfairly students were judged based on limited knowledge and bias. What was perceived as laziness or low intelligence often reflected a mismatch between teaching methods and the brain's natural learning pathways.

Today, awareness of neurodiversity and evidence-based practices has grown considerably. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), early intervention, and inclusive teaching strategies now enable children with ADHD, dyslexia, autism, and other learning differences to thrive. Social and emotional support, paired with research-driven instruction, has transformed educational approaches and promoted empathy, understanding, and equity in classrooms (Fletcher et al., 2019; Snowling & Hulme, 2020). Yet even as society progresses, the memory of those early labels reminds us of the importance of compassion and vigilance against assumptions that reduce a child's potential to a stereotype. Recognizing diversity in how humans think and learn allows us to move beyond judgment and toward a more inclusive, empathetic vision of education.



Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Although inclusive education is now a global priority, implementation continues to face multiple challenges. One of the greatest barriers is the lack of adequate teacher preparation and professional development. Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman (2008) found that numerous teachers feel insufficiently prepared to meet the varied learning requirements of students with disabilities, primarily because of gaps in training on inclusive and differentiated instructional methods. The absence of specialized staff—such as special-education teachers, therapists, and assistants—further complicates inclusion (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006).

In many low- and middle-income nations, schools often face shortages of appropriate learning tools, assistive devices, and accessible infrastructure to effectively support students with physical, sensory, or cognitive challenges (UNESCO, 2020). Financial constraints intensify these limitations as governments struggle to allocate sufficient funds for inclusive programs and training (Pather, 2019).

Attitudinal barriers also persist. Negative or misinformed perceptions of students with disabilities remain among some teachers, parents, and peers, occasionally leading to subtle exclusion within the classroom (Florian, 2014). Such views, often rooted in cultural beliefs, can undermine inclusion even when supportive policies exist.

Systemic issues—rigid curricula, large class sizes, and insufficient administrative support—also impede success. Standardized assessments and performance pressures frequently limit flexibility in teaching diverse learners (UNESCO, 2020). If educational policies and institutional efforts are not aligned and continuously supported, inclusive education may remain a well-intentioned ideal instead of a fully realized practice.

Teacher Perspectives and Experiences

Teachers play a central role in translating inclusion policies into classroom practice. My own experience as a Special Education teacher reflects the complexities of this process. Some lead teachers express discomfort when students with special needs join mainstream classes, preferring separate resource rooms. While often intended as support, this approach contradicts the goal of inclusion, which emphasizes full participation within the general education setting (UNESCO, 2020).

Studies show that numerous general education teachers lack confidence in teaching students with disabilities, mainly because they have had limited preparation or experience with inclusive teaching strategies (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Sharma et al., 2008). This uncertainty can create resistance and the perception that inclusion increases workload or disrupts class management (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). As a result, students with special needs may still experience marginalization even within “inclusive” systems.

Another source of tension arises between Special Education and general education teachers. Some lead teachers may interpret the presence of a Special Education teacher as supervision rather than collaboration. This misunderstanding can limit communication and weaken teamwork (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Effective inclusion requires clear role definitions, shared responsibility, and a collaborative approach to instruction and assessment (Friend, Cook, & Hurley-Chamberlain, 2010).

Scholars emphasize the importance of sustained professional development and institutional support to build inclusive competencies (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Schools should cultivate professional cultures that empower both general and Special Education teachers to collaborate as partners. When teachers feel supported and respected, they are more likely to adopt inclusive methods that ensure no learner is left behind.

Strategies and Best Practices

Effective inclusion depends on practical strategies that empower educators to address diverse learning needs. Teacher training and ongoing professional development are vital. Teachers need to develop a solid understanding of inclusive teaching methods, differentiation techniques, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to effectively adapt instruction for diverse learners (CAST, 2018; Florian & Beaton, 2018). These programs should also foster positive attitudes toward inclusion and build teachers’ confidence in handling classroom diversity (Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

Lead teachers must understand various learning disabilities so they can adjust instruction appropriately. Schools should offer regular training on how to teach students with different learning needs in mainstream classrooms. As inclusion teachers, mastery of subject content and early lesson planning are essential for adapting materials, worksheets, and assessments effectively.

Inclusive learning can be strengthened through collaborative models—such as co-teaching partnerships between general and special-education teachers—that encourage shared planning and instruction (Friend et al., 2010). These partnerships foster professional learning communities built on respect, communication, and shared accountability. Special Education and lead teachers should work together to determine appropriate accommodations and modifications, particularly when setting goals in students’ IEPs.

School leadership also plays a critical role. Administrators must champion inclusive values, provide resources, and facilitate staff collaboration (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Leadership should ensure that funding, training, and assistive technologies are available to meet learners’ needs (UNESCO, 2020).

Family and community engagement further strengthens inclusion. Parents should participate actively in educational planning, helping bridge home and school environments (Hornby, 2015). When schools collaborate with families and community



organizations, they better understand student contexts and promote belonging for every learner.

Without consistent policy implementation and ongoing institutional support, inclusive education may struggle to progress from an ideal to an everyday educational reality. In contrast, when teacher empowerment, collaboration, leadership, and community partnerships align, inclusion becomes both achievable and sustainable.

REFERENCES

(APA 7th Edition – unchanged, correctly formatted)

[Ainscow & Sandill (2010); Ainscow et al. (2006); Avramidis & Norwich (2002); Boroson (2017); CAST (2018); Education Writers Association (2021); Florian (2014); Florian & Beaton (2018); Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011); Forlin & Chambers (2011); Friend et al. (2010); Hornby (2015); Pather (2019); Sharma et al. (2008); UNESCO (2020); and related cited works.]