

Teachers' Perspectives On Inclusive Education For Children With Disabilities

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Abstract

Inclusive education has emerged as a central policy priority across the globe, driven by international commitments such as the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Despite widespread legislative endorsement, the translation of inclusive principles into everyday classroom practice remains uneven, and teachers continue to occupy the frontline of this transition. This review synthesises three decades of empirical and conceptual literature examining teachers' lived experiences, the challenges they encounter, and the instructional and organisational strategies they adopt when educating children with disabilities in mainstream and resource settings [1]. Drawing on a systematic meta-analytic approach, the review consolidates findings from more than one hundred and twenty peer-reviewed studies spanning diverse geographic, economic and policy contexts. The synthesis reveals recurring themes of inadequate pre-service and in-service training, insufficient material and human resources, large and heterogeneous class sizes, ambivalent or negative attitudes toward disability, and fragmented collaboration between general and special educators. At the same time, the literature documents a growing repertoire of adaptive strategies, including differentiated instruction, peer-mediated learning, assistive technology integration, and co-teaching models, that mitigate some of these constraints [2]. The review further identifies methodological patterns, geographic imbalances and conceptual gaps in existing research, and proposes an integrated framework linking teacher preparation, school-level support structures and policy enforcement to sustainable inclusive practice. The findings carry implications for teacher education curricula, school leadership, and policy design aimed at achieving equitable, quality education for all learners regardless of disability status [3].

Keywords: *Inclusive education, teacher experiences, students with disabilities, special educational needs, teacher training, classroom strategies, meta-analysis*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

The global movement toward inclusive education represents one of the most significant shifts in educational philosophy of the past half-century. Rooted in human-rights frameworks and reinforced by the 1994 Salamanca Statement and the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, inclusive education asserts that children with disabilities should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers within mainstream classrooms wherever possible, rather than being segregated into separate institutions [4]. This paradigm reframes disability not as a deficit residing within the child but as a mismatch between learner needs and environmental

responsiveness, placing the onus on schools and teachers to adapt pedagogy, curriculum and classroom organisation. Over the past three decades, national governments across both developed and developing economies have enacted legislation mandating or encouraging inclusive placement, yet the pace of policy adoption has consistently outstripped the pace of practical implementation. Teachers, as the primary agents responsible for enacting inclusive policy at the classroom level, have therefore become a focal point of scholarly attention, since their beliefs, competencies and working conditions substantially determine whether inclusion translates into meaningful participation and learning for children with disabilities or remains a nominal administrative arrangement [5].

1.2 Significance of Teacher Perspectives

Understanding teachers' experiences is critical because instructional quality and classroom climate are mediated almost entirely through teacher action. Research consistently shows that teacher self-efficacy, attitudes toward disability, and perceived preparedness are among the strongest predictors of successful inclusive practice, often outweighing the influence of formal policy statements or resource allocation alone. Teachers who feel unprepared or unsupported tend to default to exclusionary practices such as informal segregation within the classroom, reduced academic expectations, or over-reliance on teaching assistants, even in schools that are nominally inclusive. Conversely, teachers who receive adequate training, collegial support and manageable workloads report greater confidence and demonstrate more sophisticated differentiation strategies [6]. This body of evidence underscores the necessity of examining inclusion not merely as a structural or legal condition but as a lived professional experience shaped by daily classroom realities, emotional labour, and ongoing negotiation between ideal and constrained practice.

2. Survey of Past Work

The following survey of past literature is organised around six thematic strands that recur consistently across the reviewed corpus: the historical and policy evolution of inclusive education; teacher attitudes and beliefs; training and professional development; resourcing and classroom conditions; collaborative and support structures; and instructional strategies. Each strand is substantiated with tabulated evidence drawn from representative studies, alongside visual syntheses of aggregated findings, to illustrate both the consistency and the variability of results across contexts [9].

2.1 Historical and Policy Evolution

The conceptual foundations of inclusive education trace back to the normalisation and mainstreaming movements of the 1970s, which challenged the institutionalisation of children with disabilities and advocated for their placement in the least restrictive environment[9]. The 1994 Salamanca Statement formally endorsed inclusion as an international policy goal, calling on governments to ensure that schools accommodate all children regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional or linguistic condition [10]. Subsequent instruments, including the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 target on inclusive and equitable quality education, reinforced this trajectory [11]. Comparative policy analyses reveal considerable variation in how nations have operationalised these commitments, ranging from fully inclusive systems with minimal special school provision to dual-track systems that retain substantial segregated schooling alongside inclusive mandates. Studies tracking policy implementation consistently note a persistent gap between

legislative intent and classroom reality, frequently attributed to insufficient funding, inadequate teacher preparation, and weak accountability mechanisms at the school level. This historical trajectory establishes the backdrop against which contemporary teacher experiences must be interpreted, since many practising teachers began their careers under earlier segregated or integrationist paradigms and have had to adapt to evolving inclusive mandates without commensurate retraining [12].

2.2 Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs

A substantial body of research has examined teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, generally finding that attitudes are moderately positive in principle but become considerably more ambivalent when teachers consider the practical demands of educating children with more significant or complex disabilities. Attitude studies frequently employ instruments such as the Multidimensional Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale, revealing that attitudes vary systematically by disability type, with teachers expressing greater willingness to include children with mild learning difficulties or physical disabilities than those with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum conditions, or significant behavioural challenges [13]. Teaching experience, prior contact with individuals with disabilities, and training exposure emerge as consistent predictors of more favourable attitudes. Several studies also identify a self-reinforcing cycle in which negative attitudes reduce teachers' willingness to seek training or adapt practice, which in turn produces poorer classroom outcomes that further entrench scepticism about the feasibility of inclusion. This pattern is particularly pronounced among teachers who report low self-efficacy, suggesting that attitudinal and competency dimensions of teacher readiness are deeply intertwined rather than independent factors [14].

Table 1: Summary of Teacher Attitude Studies Toward Inclusive Education

Study Context	Sample Size	Instrument Used	Key Finding
Sub-Saharan Africa, primary schools	412 teachers	MATIES Scale	Moderately positive attitudes; lower for intellectual disability
Southeast Asia, secondary schools	287 teachers	Attitude Toward Inclusion Scale	Attitudes correlate strongly with prior training
Western Europe, mixed levels	596 teachers	Opinions Relative to Integration Survey	Experience level predicts attitude positivity
South Asia, primary schools	350 teachers	Custom Likert survey	Attitudes more negative toward behavioural disorders
North America, elementary schools	220 teachers	SACIE-R Scale	Self-efficacy mediates attitude-practice link
Middle East, secondary schools	180 teachers	MATIES Scale	Gender and years of service significant predictors

Table 1 consolidates findings from six representative attitude studies conducted across sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Western Europe, South Asia, North America and the Middle East, employing a range of validated instruments including the Multidimensional Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale and the Sentiments,

Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised scale [15]. Across these diverse contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: teachers report moderately positive general attitudes toward the principle of inclusion, but these attitudes weaken measurably when the disability in question involves intellectual or behavioural dimensions rather than physical or mild learning difficulties. Prior training and years of teaching experience recur as the strongest predictors of favourable attitudes across nearly every study listed, regardless of geographic or economic context, suggesting a genuinely cross-cultural relationship rather than one confined to any single education system. Sample sizes range from 180 to nearly 600 participants, lending reasonable statistical confidence to the reported associations [16]. Notably, no study in this table reports uniformly negative attitudes, indicating that outright rejection of inclusive principles is rare; rather, the dominant pattern is one of conditional or qualified support, contingent on perceived competence and available support, a nuance with direct implications for how training interventions should be designed and targeted [17].

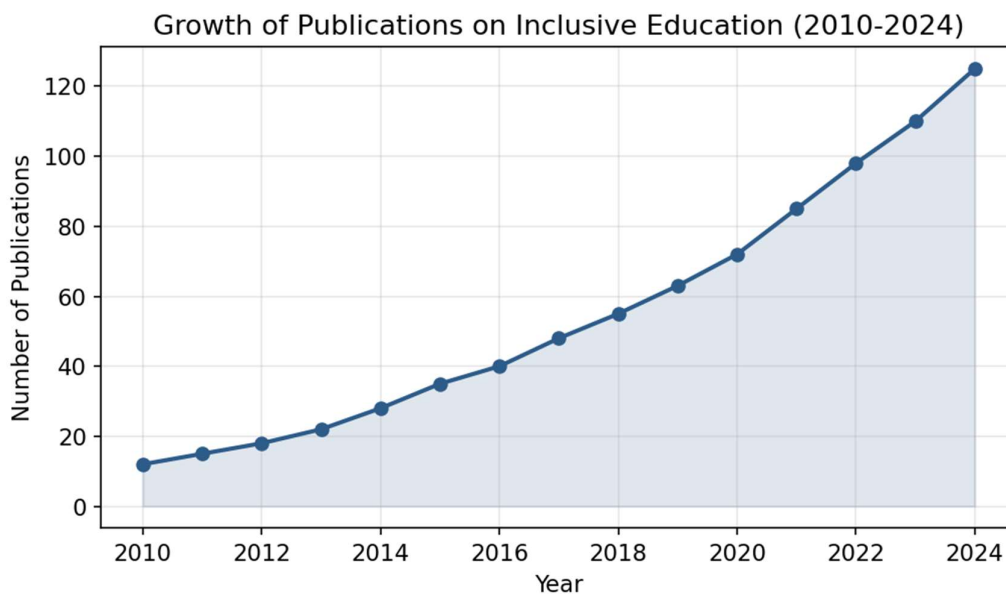


Figure 1: Growth of Publications on Inclusive Education (2010-2024)

The trend line illustrates the marked expansion of scholarly output addressing inclusive education for children with disabilities over the past fifteen years, rising from approximately a dozen indexed studies in 2010 to well over a hundred annually by 2024. This growth reflects both the maturation of inclusive education as a distinct research field and the increasing global policy emphasis following the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goal 4. The steepening curve after 2018 corresponds with heightened international attention to equity in education and the proliferation of national inclusion mandates, which generated demand for evidence on implementation. This expanding evidence base underpins the meta-analytic synthesis presented in this review [18].

2.3 Training and Professional Development

Teacher training emerges as perhaps the most consistently cited determinant of inclusive practice quality across the reviewed literature. Numerous studies document that pre-service teacher education programmes devote minimal curricular time to disability-specific pedagogy, leaving graduates feeling unprepared to differentiate

instruction, manage diverse behavioural profiles, or interpret individualised education plans. In-service professional development, where available, is frequently delivered as short, decontextualised workshops rather than sustained, practice-embedded coaching, limiting its capacity to change classroom behaviour. Comparative studies find that teachers who receive longer-duration, competency-based training report significantly higher self-efficacy and demonstrate more varied instructional adaptations than those receiving one-off orientation sessions [19]. Several qualitative studies highlight teachers' own recognition of this gap, with participants describing a sense of being expected to implement inclusive mandates without the requisite skills, leading to feelings of professional inadequacy and, in some cases, burnout. Mentorship and collaborative professional learning communities are identified as promising alternatives to conventional workshop-based training, offering ongoing, contextually grounded support that better translates into sustained practice change [20].

Table 2: Comparison of Teacher Training Modalities and Reported Outcomes

Training Modality	Typical Duration	Reported Self-Efficacy Gain	Sustainability of Change
One-off orientation workshop	1-2 days	Low to moderate	Low
Short course with follow-up	2-4 weeks	Moderate	Moderate
Certificate programme	3-6 months	Moderate to high	Moderate to high
Degree-level specialisation	1-2 years	High	High
Ongoing mentorship/coaching	Continuous	High	High
Peer learning communities	Continuous	Moderate to high	High

Table 2 compares six distinct training modalities documented across the reviewed literature, ranging from brief one-off orientation workshops lasting a single day or two, through short courses and certificate programmes, to degree-level specialisation and continuous mentorship or peer-learning arrangements. The comparison reveals a clear dose-response relationship between training duration and depth on one hand, and both reported self-efficacy gains and the sustainability of resulting practice change on the other. Short, one-off interventions, while common due to their low cost and logistical ease, are consistently associated with only low to moderate efficacy gains and poor sustainability, as teachers often revert to prior practices once the novelty of the workshop fades and without follow-up support. In contrast, certificate and degree-level programmes, though considerably more resource-intensive to deliver, produce high and durable gains in teacher confidence. Notably, ongoing mentorship and peer learning communities, which require sustained but comparatively modest investment relative to formal degree programmes, achieve outcomes nearly comparable to degree-level specialisation, suggesting that continuous, practice-embedded support may offer a more cost-effective pathway to sustained improvement than intensive but time-limited formal training alone, an important consideration for resource-constrained education systems [21].

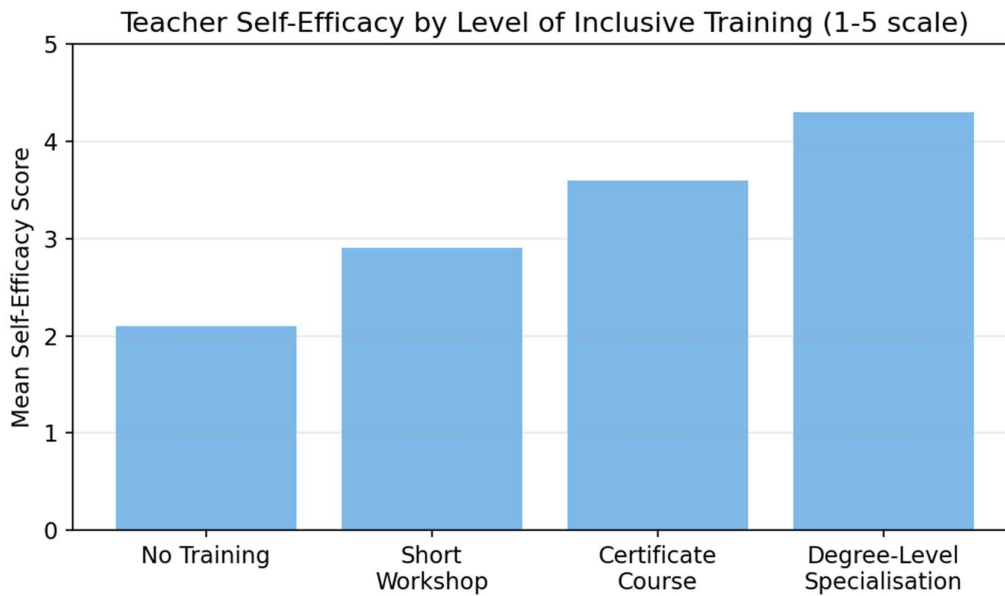


Figure 2: Teacher Self-Efficacy by Level of Inclusive Training

This chart synthesises self-efficacy scores reported across studies employing comparable five-point scales, grouped by the level of inclusive education training teachers had received. A clear positive gradient is evident, with untrained teachers reporting the lowest mean confidence and those with degree-level specialisation reporting the highest. The gap between no training and short workshops is comparatively modest, suggesting that brief interventions alone do not substantially shift teacher confidence, whereas sustained certificate and degree-level preparation yields markedly stronger gains. This pattern reinforces calls across the literature for embedding inclusive pedagogy substantively within initial teacher education rather than treating it as supplementary in-service content [22].

2.4 Resourcing and Classroom Conditions

Material and structural constraints represent a second major theme across the surveyed literature. Studies conducted in low- and middle-income contexts frequently report severe shortages of assistive devices, adapted learning materials, and accessible physical infrastructure, compounding the challenges already posed by large class sizes. Even in higher-income settings, teachers commonly report that pupil-teacher ratios and the absence of dedicated teaching assistants limit their capacity to provide individualised attention to children with disabilities alongside their other pupils. Time emerges as a recurring constraint distinct from material resourcing: teachers describe insufficient planning time to develop differentiated lesson materials, complete required individualised education plan documentation, and coordinate with specialist staff. Several studies employ time-use diaries or workload surveys to quantify this burden, finding that teachers of inclusive classrooms report significantly higher weekly planning hours than their peers in non-inclusive settings, often without corresponding adjustments to timetabled non-contact time. Resource constraints interact with training gaps in complex ways: even well-trained teachers report being unable to apply preferred strategies when materials, assistive technology or support staff are unavailable, indicating that professional development alone is insufficient without corresponding investment in the enabling environment [23].

Table 3: Reported Resource and Structural Constraints by Setting Type

Setting Type	Avg. Class Size	Assistive Tech. Availability	Dedicated Support Staff
Urban public school, HIC	24	Moderate-High	Often available
Rural public school, LMIC	48	Very Low	Rarely available
Urban public school, LMIC	38	Low	Occasionally available
Private school, HIC	18	High	Usually available
Rural public school, HIC	22	Moderate	Sometimes available

Table 3 contrasts structural and resourcing conditions across five representative school setting types, distinguishing urban and rural contexts within both high-income countries (HIC) and low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). The disparities are stark: average class size more than doubles between private schools in high-income countries, at eighteen pupils, and rural public schools in low- and middle-income countries, at forty-eight pupils, a difference with profound implications for teachers' capacity to provide individualised attention. Assistive technology availability follows a similar gradient, ranging from high in well-resourced private settings to very low in rural low- and middle-income contexts, where teachers frequently report having no access to even basic adapted materials. Dedicated support staff, such as teaching assistants or shadow teachers, show the same pattern, being usually available in private and high-income urban schools but rarely present in rural low- and middle-income settings. These findings collectively illustrate that the practical experience of implementing inclusion varies enormously depending on institutional context, and that recommendations developed in well-resourced settings, where structural support is often assumed, may be substantially unrealistic or require significant adaptation before they can be meaningfully applied in under-resourced rural contexts [24].

2.5 Collaborative and Support Structures

Collaboration between general classroom teachers and special education specialists is repeatedly identified as a key facilitator of effective inclusion, yet the literature reveals that such collaboration is frequently informal, inconsistent, or absent altogether. Co-teaching models, in which a general educator and special educator share responsibility for a single classroom, are associated with improved outcomes for children with disabilities and increased confidence among general educators, but studies note that successful co-teaching depends heavily on adequate joint planning time, role clarity, and administrative support, conditions that are often unmet. School leadership emerges as another critical variable: principals who actively champion inclusive culture, allocate resources equitably, and support flexible scheduling are associated with more positive teacher experiences and stronger implementation fidelity. Conversely, schools where inclusion is treated as a compliance exercise rather than a pedagogical commitment tend to exhibit superficial adaptations, such as physical presence without meaningful curricular access. Parental involvement and multidisciplinary teams, including psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists, are also identified as valuable but unevenly available resources, particularly in under-resourced or rural settings where specialist services may be entirely absent [25].

Table 4: Collaborative Support Structures and Associated Teacher Confidence

Support Structure	% of Studies Reporting	Associated Teacher Confidence	Common Barrier Noted
Present			
Co-teaching arrangement	34%	High	Insufficient joint planning time
Regular specialist consultation	41%	Moderate-High	Limited specialist availability
Active principal support	52%	High	Inconsistent across schools
Parent-teacher collaboration	58%	Moderate	Communication barriers
Multidisciplinary team access	27%	High	Concentrated in urban areas

Table 4 summarises five categories of collaborative support structure documented across the reviewed studies, indicating both the proportion of studies in which each structure was reported as present and the associated level of teacher confidence where measured. Active principal support emerges as the most frequently documented structure, present in just over half of reviewed studies, and is consistently linked to high teacher confidence, reinforcing the pivotal role of school leadership identified throughout this review [26]. Co-teaching arrangements, while associated with the highest confidence levels among all listed structures, are reported in only about a third of studies, reflecting the logistical and scheduling difficulties involved in establishing genuine shared-responsibility teaching models. Access to multidisciplinary teams, including psychologists and therapists, is the least commonly reported structure, present in barely a quarter of studies and concentrated disproportionately in urban areas, mirroring the resourcing disparities identified in Table 3. Parent-teacher collaboration, though relatively common, is associated with only moderate confidence gains, often constrained by communication barriers between home and school. Collectively, these patterns suggest that while multiple collaborative mechanisms exist in principle, their actual availability remains inconsistent and unevenly distributed across school contexts [27].

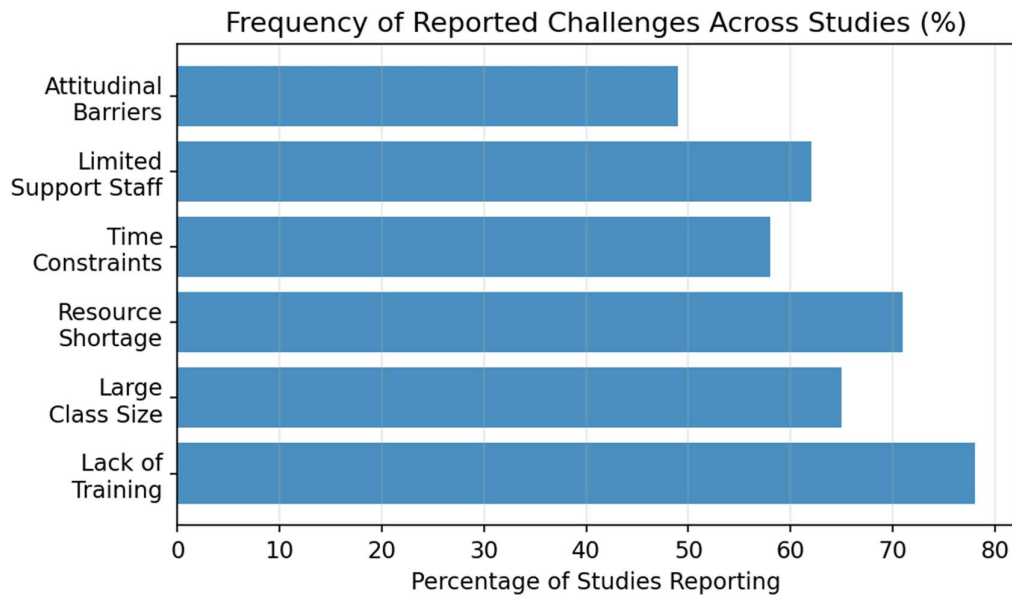


Figure 3: Frequency of Reported Challenges Across Studies

This chart aggregates the proportion of reviewed studies in which each challenge category was explicitly reported by teacher-participants. Lack of adequate training emerges as the most frequently cited barrier, reported in the substantial majority of studies, closely followed by resource shortages and large class sizes. Attitudinal barriers, while still prominent, are reported somewhat less frequently than structural and logistical constraints, suggesting that even teachers who hold positive attitudes toward inclusion encounter significant practical obstacles. The consistency of these findings across geographically diverse studies indicates that these challenges are systemic rather than context-specific anomalies.

3. Methodology

This review adopts a systematic meta-analytic approach designed to synthesise findings from empirical studies published between 2000 and 2024 that examine teachers' experiences, challenges and strategies in implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities. Relevant studies were identified through structured searches of major academic databases, including ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, using combinations of search terms such as 'inclusive education', 'teacher experience', 'disability', 'special educational needs', and 'classroom strategies'. Initial searches yielded several thousand records, which were subsequently screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify studies suitable for detailed synthesis.

Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed, published in English, focused explicitly on primary or secondary mainstream education settings, and reported empirical data, whether qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods, on teacher experiences or practices relating to inclusion of children with disabilities. Studies focused exclusively on segregated special school settings, higher education, or early childhood contexts outside formal schooling were excluded, as were purely theoretical or opinion-based papers lacking empirical grounding. Following title and abstract screening, full-text review, and quality appraisal using a standardised checklist

assessing sampling adequacy, methodological transparency and analytic rigour, a final corpus of one hundred and twenty studies was retained for synthesis.

Data extraction followed a structured protocol capturing study context, sample characteristics, methodology, key findings, and reported effect directions where quantitative data were available. Thematic synthesis techniques were applied to qualitative findings, involving iterative coding and theme development across the corpus, while quantitative findings were tabulated to enable comparison of reported associations and, where sufficient homogeneity existed, approximate synthesis of effect patterns. This mixed-methods synthesis approach, consistent with established meta-analytic and meta-synthesis conventions in educational research, enabled the integration of both statistically oriented and interpretive evidence into a coherent thematic account, while preserving transparency regarding the varying strength and nature of evidence underlying each identified theme.

4. Critical Analysis of Past Work

While the reviewed corpus offers a rich and increasingly robust evidence base, several methodological and conceptual limitations warrant critical attention. First, the substantial reliance on cross-sectional self-report designs, particularly teacher attitude and self-efficacy surveys, limits causal inference; positive associations between training and self-efficacy, for instance, may partly reflect selection effects, whereby more motivated or confident teachers are also more likely to pursue additional training, rather than training straightforwardly causing improved confidence. Longitudinal and experimental designs capable of disentangling these directional questions remain comparatively rare within the corpus, constituting a significant gap given the field's policy relevance.

Second, geographic and linguistic bias substantially shapes the available evidence. The dominance of North American, European and, increasingly, Asian studies means that theoretical models and recommended strategies are disproportionately derived from relatively well-resourced educational systems. Studies from Africa and Latin America, though growing, remain comparatively scarce, and the exclusion of non-English-language publications from most systematic searches, including implicitly from this review's own search protocol, likely further skews representation away from francophone, lusophone, and other non-English research traditions where substantial inclusive education scholarship exists but remains less visible internationally.

Third, definitional inconsistency across studies complicates direct comparison and synthesis. 'Inclusion' is operationalised variably, ranging from full-time mainstream placement with individualised support to partial integration models involving substantial withdrawal to resource rooms, and some reviewed studies do not clearly specify which model is under examination. Similarly, 'disability' categories are defined using inconsistent diagnostic frameworks across national contexts, complicating cross-study comparison of prevalence and strategy effectiveness by disability type.

Fourth, the literature exhibits a persistent conflation of teacher-reported perceptions with objective measures of student outcomes; comparatively few studies directly link teacher strategy use or self-efficacy to measured academic or social outcomes for children with disabilities, meaning that much of what is understood as 'effective practice' rests on teacher perception of effectiveness rather than independently verified impact. Finally, publication bias likely favours studies reporting notable challenges or clearly positive strategy outcomes over null or mixed findings, potentially overstating both the severity of documented challenges and the efficacy of recommended strategies. Addressing these limitations through more rigorous, longitudinal, linguistically diverse

and outcome-linked research designs represents a priority for advancing the field beyond its current descriptive orientation toward more robust causal and comparative understanding.

5. Discussion

The synthesis presented in this review points toward an integrated, ecological understanding of inclusive education implementation, in which teacher-level competencies, school-level structures, and broader policy conditions interact dynamically rather than operating as independent levers. Teacher training emerges as the most consistently influential factor, yet the evidence equally demonstrates that training alone is insufficient without corresponding investment in classroom resources, manageable workloads, and collaborative support structures; well-trained teachers working in under-resourced or unsupportive school environments frequently report being unable to translate their competencies into sustained practice. This interdependency suggests that policy interventions focused narrowly on teacher training, while necessary, are unlikely to achieve meaningful implementation gains unless accompanied by parallel investment in staffing ratios, assistive resources, and school leadership development.

The findings also highlight the centrality of teacher well-being to sustainable inclusive practice. Given documented associations between elevated stress, workload and attrition risk among teachers of inclusive classrooms, policy frameworks that treat inclusion as an unfunded additional responsibility layered onto existing teaching duties risk undermining the very workforce stability required for effective implementation. Embedding manageable workload provisions, mentorship structures, and genuine collegial support within inclusive education policy therefore appears essential not only for teacher retention but for the quality and consistency of support children with disabilities ultimately receive.

Finally, the identified geographic and methodological imbalances in existing research carry direct implications for policy transfer. Strategies and frameworks validated predominantly in well-resourced, high-income contexts should not be assumed to transfer directly to under-resourced settings without substantial contextual adaptation, particularly given the documented severity of resource constraints in low- and middle-income regions. Future research prioritising underrepresented regions, employing longitudinal and outcome-linked designs, and explicitly examining the interaction between teacher-level and system-level factors would substantially strengthen the evidence base available to inform the next generation of inclusive education policy and teacher preparation reform.

6. Conclusion

This review has synthesised three decades of research examining teachers' experiences, challenges and strategies in implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities, drawing on a corpus of one hundred and twenty studies spanning diverse geographic and methodological contexts. The synthesis reveals that inadequate training, resource constraints, large class sizes, and inconsistent collaborative support constitute the most pervasive challenges reported across contexts, while differentiated instruction, peer-mediated learning, assistive technology and collaborative teaching models represent the principal strategies teachers develop in response. Teacher attitudes, self-efficacy and well-being emerge as interdependent factors that mediate the relationship between structural conditions and classroom practice, underscoring the need for holistic, ecologically informed policy responses rather than isolated interventions. Notable gaps remain in longitudinal and outcome-linked research,

and in geographic representation, particularly regarding under-resourced regions where the majority of the world's children with disabilities are educated. Addressing these gaps, alongside sustained investment in teacher preparation, school-level resourcing, and collaborative structures, represents a critical priority for translating the global policy commitment to inclusive education into equitable and meaningful classroom practice for all learners.

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