

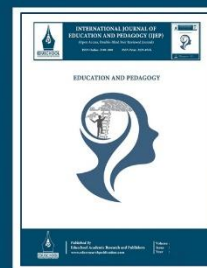


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Secondary School Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education in Kerala, India: Challenges, Preparedness, and Support Needs

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Abstract

Inclusive education has become a central goal of education policy worldwide, yet its realisation ultimately depends on the perceptions and practices of classroom teachers. This study explored how secondary school teachers in Kerala, India, understand inclusive education and the challenges they encounter in implementing it. A qualitative, interpretive design was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen secondary school teachers selected through purposive sampling from government and aided schools. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was addressed through member checking, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling. Five themes were constructed from the data: a cautious commitment to inclusion as a principle coupled with uncertainty about personal capacity; structural and resource barriers such as large class sizes and inadequate materials; significant gaps in pre-service preparation and ongoing professional development; the rigidity of a standardised curriculum and examination system; and the importance of collaboration with peers, special educators, and families as a source of support. Teachers endorsed inclusion in principle but felt insufficiently equipped to enact it, and they attributed difficulties primarily to systemic rather than personal shortcomings. The study recommends sustained teacher preparation, flexible curricula and assessment, and strengthened support structures, and discusses implications for teacher education, school leadership, and inclusive education policy in India.

Keywords:- Inclusive Education, Teacher Perceptions, Secondary Education, Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Research

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as one of the defining aspirations of contemporary schooling. Rooted in the principle that all learners, regardless of ability, background, or circumstance, have the right to learn together in mainstream settings, it reframes diversity as an ordinary feature of the classroom rather than a problem to be managed elsewhere. International agreements such as the Salamanca Statement gave early impetus to this movement by calling on schools to accommodate all children within a common system (UNESCO, 1994), and subsequent global monitoring has continued to place inclusion at the centre of the agenda for equitable education (UNESCO, 2020). Yet the gap between the promise of inclusion in policy and its realisation in practice remains wide, and closing it depends heavily on the teachers who translate policy into daily classroom life.

Teachers occupy a pivotal position in inclusive reform because their beliefs, competencies, and working conditions shape whether inclusive intentions become inclusive experiences. A substantial literature indicates that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are generally favourable in principle but are moderated by concerns about preparedness, resources, and workload (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Where teachers feel unsupported or ill-equipped, inclusive placement can amount to physical presence without genuine participation. Understanding how teachers themselves perceive inclusive education, and what they experience as enabling or constraining, is therefore essential to improving practice.

In India, the commitment to inclusion has been strengthened by legislation and policy, and the National Education Policy 2020 reaffirms the goal of an equitable and inclusive system in which no child is left behind (Ministry of Human

Resource Development, 2020). At the same time, scholars have noted that the transfer of an internationally derived concept into the Indian context raises distinctive challenges of interpretation, capacity, and provision (Singal, 2006; Kalyanpur, 2008). Kerala, with its comparatively strong educational infrastructure and history of social reform, offers an informative setting for examining how these tensions play out at the secondary level, where subject specialisation, examination pressure, and larger classes complicate inclusive practice.

Against this background, the present study explored secondary school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education and the challenges they face in implementing it. Two research questions guided the inquiry: how do secondary school teachers understand and interpret inclusive education; and what challenges do they experience in putting it into practice? By foregrounding teachers' own accounts, the study contributes context-sensitive, qualitative evidence to a field in which large-scale surveys have predominated, and it aims to inform teacher education, school leadership, and policy.

The significance of the study lies in its attention to the perspectives of those on whom inclusive reform ultimately depends. Policy statements and legal mandates set expectations, but it is teachers who determine, day by day, whether a diverse classroom becomes a site of genuine participation or merely of shared physical space. Much existing research has measured teachers' attitudes at a distance through questionnaires; comparatively little has listened closely to how teachers narrate their own experiences, reasoning, and constraints. By privileging these accounts within a specific Indian setting, the study seeks to surface the practical realities that shape implementation and to generate insights that are directly usable by teacher educators, school leaders, and policymakers pursuing inclusion.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Conceptualising Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is understood not merely as the placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms but as an ongoing process of increasing participation and reducing exclusion for all students (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Ainscow (2005) characterises inclusion as a principled reform of the whole system rather than a targeted programme, requiring changes in cultures, policies, and practices. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) advance the notion of inclusive pedagogy, which extends what is ordinarily available to all learners rather than providing something different for some, thereby avoiding the marginalisation that can accompany individualised provision. These conceptions frame inclusion as a matter of ordinary good teaching for a diverse class.

2.2. Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs

Teachers' attitudes are among the most studied determinants of inclusive practice. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) concluded from their review that attitudes are generally positive but conditional, shaped by the nature of the students' needs, the availability of support, and teachers' sense of efficacy. Positive attitudes do not automatically translate into inclusive practice when structural conditions are unfavourable. Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman (2008) found that appropriate training reduced pre-service teachers' concerns and improved their attitudes and confidence, underscoring the malleability of beliefs through preparation.

A related strand of work highlights the role of self-efficacy, the belief in one's capability to bring about desired outcomes, in mediating between attitudes and practice. Teachers who feel competent to manage diverse classrooms are more likely to persist with inclusive strategies in the face of difficulty, whereas low efficacy can lead to avoidance or reliance on withdrawal-based provision. Because efficacy is itself shaped by experience, feedback, and support, it offers a promising point of leverage: strengthening teachers' sense of capability, rather than exhorting them to hold more positive attitudes, may be the more effective route to inclusive practice.

2.3. Barriers to Implementation

Research consistently identifies a cluster of barriers that impede inclusion, including large class sizes, insufficient teaching and learning materials, inaccessible physical environments, rigid curricula, and examination-oriented systems that reward uniformity over differentiation. In the Indian context, Das, Kuyini, and Desai (2013) reported that a majority of teachers felt inadequately prepared to teach students with disabilities and lacked access to necessary resources. Kalyanpur (2008) argued that constraints of quantity and quality in provision, together with the transplantation of Western models, complicate the pursuit of genuine inclusion in resource-constrained settings.

2.4. Teacher Preparation and Support

The preparation teachers receive is widely seen as decisive. Forlin (2010) contends that teacher education must be reformed to equip all teachers, not only specialists, with the values and competencies for inclusion. Loreman, Deppeler, and Harvey (2010) emphasise practical strategies for supporting diversity, while collaborative structures such as co-teaching and access to special educators are repeatedly identified as important supports. Where such preparation and support are absent, teachers are left to improvise, and inclusive placement risks becoming nominal.

Beyond formal training, the wider culture and leadership of a school shape whether inclusion is sustained. Supportive leadership that articulates an inclusive vision, allocates resources, and protects time for collaboration can create conditions in which teachers are willing to take pedagogical risks. Conversely, where inclusion is treated as the responsibility of a designated specialist rather than as a shared commitment, mainstream teachers may disengage from it. The literature thus points to preparation and support as operating at multiple levels, from the individual teacher's competencies to the collective ethos and structures of the institution.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by the social model of disability and by ecological systems theory. The social model locates disability not in individual deficit but in the barriers that societies and institutions erect, directing attention to the removal of those barriers rather than the remediation of learners (Oliver, 1996). Ecological systems theory situates the teacher and student within nested systems of influence, from the immediate classroom to the wider institutional and policy environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Together these lenses frame teachers' challenges as arising from the interaction of individuals with their surrounding structures, rather than from personal shortcomings alone.

2.6. Research Gap and Questions

Although the international literature on inclusive education is extensive, much of it relies on attitudinal surveys, and qualitative accounts of how secondary teachers in Indian settings experience inclusion remain comparatively scarce. Understanding these experiences in depth is necessary to interpret the patterns surveys reveal and to design responsive support. The present study therefore asked how secondary school teachers understand inclusive education and what challenges they encounter in implementing it, seeking rich, context-grounded insight rather than generalisable frequencies.

III. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative, interpretive design was adopted, on the premise that teachers' perceptions and experiences are best understood through their own accounts and in their own terms. Such a design is well suited to exploring meaning, context, and complexity, which are difficult to capture through standardised instruments. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method because they combine a consistent focus with the flexibility to pursue participants' concerns as they arise.

3.2. Participants

Fifteen secondary school teachers were selected through purposive sampling from government and aided schools in the Malappuram district of Kerala. Selection sought variation in gender, subject area, and years of experience to capture a range of perspectives. Participants had between four and twenty-six years of teaching experience and had taught classes that included students with diverse learning needs. Sampling continued until the interviews were yielding little that was new, indicating that a sufficient depth of information had been reached.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews guided by an open-ended schedule covering teachers' understandings of inclusion, their classroom experiences, the challenges they faced, and the supports they drew upon. Interviews lasted between forty and sixty minutes, were conducted in the language in which participants were most comfortable, and were audio-recorded with consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary, with care to preserve meaning.

3.4. Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach of familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis proceeded inductively, with codes derived from the data rather than imposed from a prior framework, and codes were then collated into candidate themes that were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full data set. The process was iterative, and the researcher moved repeatedly between the parts and the whole to ensure that themes were well grounded.

Consistent with the reflexive orientation of this analytic approach, the researcher's own background as an educator was treated as a resource rather than a source of bias to be eliminated. Prior familiarity with school settings aided interpretation, but it also carried the risk of imposing preconceptions, and this was managed through reflexive journaling and through deliberate attention to instances that did not fit emerging patterns. Coding was revisited several times, and provisional interpretations were tested against the full set of transcripts, so that the themes reported here reflect a considered engagement with the data rather than first impressions.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by member checking, in which participants reviewed summaries of their interviews, and by prolonged engagement with the data. Thick description was provided to support transferability, an audit trail documented analytic decisions to strengthen dependability, and reflexive journaling was used to make the researcher's assumptions explicit and thereby support confirmability.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review committee. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and participants were free to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was protected by anonymising transcripts and using pseudonymous identifiers, and data were stored securely. Care was taken to ensure that discussion of challenges did not expose individuals or schools to identification.

IV. FINDINGS

Analysis of the interviews produced five themes describing how teachers understood inclusive education and the challenges they faced. The themes and their representative subthemes are summarised in Table 1. Illustrative extracts are presented below with pseudonymous identifiers; all quotations are indicative of patterns across the data set.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes Constructed from the Teacher Interviews

Theme	Representative subthemes
Cautious commitment to inclusion	Inclusion as a right; uncertainty about personal capacity
Structural and resource barriers	Large classes; scarce materials; physical accessibility
Gaps in preparation	Limited pre-service training; few development opportunities
Curricular and assessment rigidity	Standardised curriculum; examination pressure
Sources of support	Peer collaboration; special educators; family partnership

Note. Themes were constructed through reflexive thematic analysis of fifteen teacher interviews.

4.1. A Cautious Commitment to Inclusion

Teachers expressed a clear endorsement of inclusion as a principle, describing it as a matter of fairness and of every child's right to belong. This commitment, however, was tempered by uncertainty about their own capacity to meet diverse needs. One participant captured this tension: "I believe every child should be in the same classroom. That is right. But honestly, I am not always sure how to teach a child who learns very differently while forty others are waiting." (Teacher 4)

This pattern, of principled support qualified by doubts about efficacy, recurred throughout the interviews and echoes the conditional attitudes reported in the wider literature.

4.2. Structural and Resource Barriers

Participants consistently attributed their difficulties to structural conditions rather than to the students themselves. Large class sizes were identified as the most pervasive obstacle, alongside a shortage of appropriate materials and, in some schools, physically inaccessible spaces. "With so many students in one room, giving individual attention is very difficult. We do not have the materials or the space that these children need." (Teacher 9)

Such accounts frame the challenge of inclusion as located in the environment surrounding the classroom, consistent with a social-model reading of disability.

4.3. Gaps in Preparation and Development

A strong and widely shared theme concerned the inadequacy of teachers' preparation. Many reported that their pre-service training had given little attention to inclusive pedagogy, and that opportunities for ongoing professional development were infrequent and often generic. "Nobody really taught us how to do this. We learn by trial and error. A few workshops are not enough to change how you teach every day." (Teacher 12)

Teachers thus experienced a mismatch between the expectations placed upon them and the preparation they had received, a gap they saw as systemic rather than personal.

Several participants contrasted the confidence of designated special educators with their own sense of improvisation, and expressed a wish for preparation that was practical and continuous rather than theoretical and occasional. The desire was not for more information in the abstract but for guidance embedded in the realities of their own classrooms. "We need someone to show us, in our own classroom, with our own students, how to do it. Reading about it in a training hall is not the same." (Teacher 6)

4.4. Curricular and Assessment Rigidity

The standardised curriculum and examination system were described as constraining inclusive practice. Teachers felt pressure to cover prescribed content at a fixed pace and to prepare all students for uniform examinations, leaving little room for differentiation. "The syllabus and the exam are the same for everyone. There is no flexibility. How can I adjust for one child when the exam will not adjust for that child?" (Teacher 2)

This rigidity was seen as undermining the very flexibility that inclusion requires, pulling practice back toward uniformity.

4.5. Sources of Support

Despite the challenges, teachers identified valuable sources of support. Informal collaboration with colleagues, access to special educators where available, and partnership with families were all described as helping them cope and improve. "When I can talk to the special educator or to the child's parents, everything becomes easier. Alone it is hard; together we manage." (Teacher 7)

These accounts point to the importance of collaborative structures and suggest that strengthening them could enhance teachers' capacity for inclusion.

Taken together, the five themes cohere around a single underlying narrative. Teachers positioned themselves as willing participants in an inclusive project whose success was largely outside their individual control, constrained by conditions they did not set and had limited power to change. Their commitment was genuine but strained, their difficulties were understood as systemic, and their coping depended on relationships and supports that were often informal and unevenly available. This

narrative of committed but under-resourced practitioners, rather than of reluctant or resistant ones, has important implications for how inclusive reform is framed and pursued, a point developed in the discussion that follows.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1. Interpreting Teachers' Perceptions

The findings portray teachers who embrace inclusion as a value while doubting their preparedness to enact it, a configuration consistent with the conditional attitudes documented across the literature (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The gap between principled endorsement and practical confidence is significant because attitudes alone do not secure inclusive practice when teachers feel unequipped. That participants located their difficulties in systemic conditions rather than in the students aligns with the social model of disability, which directs reform toward the removal of barriers rather than the remediation of learners (Oliver, 1996).

This principle-practice gap also carries a constructive implication. Because teachers already accept the values of inclusion, the task facing reformers is not primarily one of persuasion but of enablement. Efforts directed at changing attitudes may yield little when the attitudes are already favourable; efforts directed at building capability and improving conditions are more likely to move practice. Framing teachers as committed professionals constrained by circumstance, rather than as obstacles to be convinced, reorients reform toward the supports and structures that would allow existing goodwill to be expressed in the classroom.

5.2. Systemic Barriers and Their Interpretation

The prominence of structural and curricular barriers echoes findings from Indian and international research alike (Das et al., 2013; Kalyanpur, 2008). Viewed through an ecological lens, the teacher's classroom is embedded within institutional and policy systems whose features, from class size to examination design, powerfully shape what is possible (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The tension teachers described between a standardised system and the flexibility inclusion demands suggests that inclusive reform cannot be achieved at the level of the individual teacher alone but requires coordinated change across these nested systems, in keeping with Ainscow's (2005) view of inclusion as whole-system reform.

5.3. The Centrality of Preparation and Collaboration

The strong theme of inadequate preparation reinforces arguments that teacher education must be reoriented to equip all teachers for diversity (Forlin, 2010; Sharma et al., 2008). The value teachers placed on collaboration further suggests that inclusive pedagogy is a collective as much as an individual accomplishment, developed through shared expertise and partnership (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Loreman et al., 2010). Support structures that connect teachers with specialists and families appear to function as practical enablers of the participation that inclusion seeks (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

5.4. Implications

Several implications follow. Teacher education programmes should embed inclusive pedagogy throughout rather than confining it to a single course, and sustained, practice-based professional development should replace occasional generic workshops. School leaders can foster collaborative structures, protect time for planning, and interpret curricular and assessment requirements flexibly where possible. At the policy level, the inclusive aspirations of the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) will require attention to the enabling conditions, class sizes, materials, accessible environments, and assessment flexibility, without which teachers' commitment cannot be translated into practice.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

As a qualitative study of fifteen teachers in one district, the research offers depth rather than statistical generalisability, and its findings should be read as context-grounded insights rather than universal claims. Reliance on self-report through interviews means that reported practice may differ from observed practice. Future research could combine interviews with classroom observation, incorporate the perspectives of students, families, and school leaders, and extend the inquiry across regions to examine how context shapes inclusive practice. Studies evaluating specific preparation and support interventions would also be valuable.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored how secondary school teachers in Kerala perceive inclusive education and the challenges they face in implementing it. Teachers endorsed inclusion as a principle of fairness and rights yet felt insufficiently prepared and supported to realise it, attributing their difficulties chiefly to structural, curricular, and preparatory conditions rather than to students or to themselves. The findings underscore that inclusion is a whole-system endeavour whose success depends on aligning teacher preparation, school structures, and policy with the participation of every learner. Strengthening teacher education, enabling flexible curricula and assessment, and building collaborative support structures together offer a realistic path toward turning the promise of inclusive education into everyday classroom practice.

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