

Teachers' perspectives on inclusive education for students with multiple disabilities in Malaysia: A phenomenological study based on the IPAA framework



Murugesu Supermaniam^a  | Norfatin Faizah Hamdan^a 

^aSchool of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.

Abstract Inclusive education aims to meet the diverse needs of all learners through equitable access, responsive pedagogies, and supportive learning environments. On the other hand, including students with multiple disabilities presents unique challenges for teachers. The present study will investigate in-service educators' experiences, challenges, and expectations while implementing inclusive education with students with multiple disabilities. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed and employed a purposive sampling approach. The data was collected from ten preschool, primary, and secondary in-service teachers through an online open-ended survey. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process and the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA), indicated three broad themes: (1) educators' positive attitudes toward inclusion and inclusivity, (2) readiness and confidence are dependent on professional capacity, and (3) sustainable inclusion and inclusive practices require collaboration and policy change. The study emphasizes teachers' knowledge and skills in structured models of co-teaching for inclusion to provide ongoing professional learning and a whole school culture of inclusion. Additionally, this study adds to the limited literature on inclusive education in Southeast Asia and provides recommendations for educators and policymakers to improve inclusive practices in Malaysia.

Keywords: special needs education, complex learner needs, educator barriers, co-teaching, South Asian context, inclusive teaching models framework

1. Introduction

Inclusive schooling has become a core principle in global educational structures on the basis of the belief that all children, regardless of their capacities, contexts, and identities, deserve equal chances to participate in quality learning experiences. The principles set out in international instruments, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), emphasize the need for inclusive and quality learning for all members of society while specifically promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. However, despite the presence of such noble goals, the implementation of inclusive schooling among people with multiple disabilities poses considerable challenges in low- and middle-income countries such as Malaysia. Malaysia also has a deep historical commitment to inclusive education that officially began in 1926 with its first educational institution for children with visual impairment. Later, in 1954, its first school for students with hearing impairment was set up. Throughout its early efforts, the Ministry of Social Welfare played a very important role and collaborated with religious organizations and thus promoted national awareness of students' right to education despite disability. The establishment of the Special Education Department within the Ministry of Education in 1988 marked a significant step toward a more integrated and cohesive system of inclusive education (Jelas & Mohd Ali, 2014).

Subsequent developments further solidified the special education framework. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) started its first Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education program in 1993 with the aim of preparing educators for this specialized field. The Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI), launched in 1995, established specific settings for special needs in integrated schools. This program led to the introduction of the Pendidikan Inklusif (PPI) program, which was initiated in 2004, and aims to integrate students with disabilities into general classrooms. The 1996 Education Act officially established this tripartite system consisting of (1) special schools, (2) integrated programs, and (3) inclusive education programs where students with disabilities are educated with their normally developing peers. Despite these advances, Malaysia's transformation from a fragmented schooling system to one focused on inclusivity has revealed ongoing challenges. The literature shows that poor instructor training, poor preparation, and restricted inclusive pedagogical practices act as major obstacles to the effective implementation of inclusive approaches (Abu Bakar & Nordin, 2024). This challenge becomes especially evident when considering the complex demands of pupils with multiple disabilities addressed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education



Act (Etscheidt, 2024), as the cooccurring presence of two or more impairments (intellectual, sensory, physical, and/or emotional), significantly hampers educational progress.

Individuals with diverse disabilities often require ongoing collaborative support in four main areas: medical, physical, educational, and social-emotional (Horn & Kang, 2012). However, as noted in Malaysia's inclusive education scene, even that support is often confined to simple behavioral intervention and general academic adjustment without sufficient systemic support. This is problematic because it raises concerns about the comprehensiveness and long-term effectiveness of initiatives that aim at inclusion. To address the pedagogical and systemic shortcomings identified, this study is underpinned by the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2013). The IPAA argues that inclusive education does not pursue the creation of parallel systems but instead aims to adapt classroom practices to cater to all students effectively. This model is underpinned by three core principles: (1) a belief in every student's capacity to attain learning outcomes, (2) a commitment to continuous professional learning and responsive instructional approaches, and (3) a willingness to work across different professional roles (Brennan et al., 2021). In Malaysia, as inclusive education emerges in line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and the upcoming 2030 agenda, the application of the IPAA framework provides an appropriate and context-specific perspective on how educators go about including children with complex disabilities. Although regional and global aspirations exist, little is known about how educators, particularly those who work in early childhood, primary, and lower secondary school learning contexts, conceptualize their role and how they apply and sustain inclusive education for children with complex disabilities. The current research aims to fill this gap through an examination of personal accounts, barriers, and expectations experienced by Malaysian educators in inclusive education for students with various disabilities. The aim is to produce insights that will influence educational practice, shape policy making, and inform future research through a theoretically sound and contextually broad qualitative study.

The breadth of inclusion in Malaysia has significantly increased over the past decade, underscoring the country's commitment to increasing access for all students. Between 2013 and 2019, there was a remarkable increase in the number of students who were taking up inclusive schooling opportunities, from 9.6% to 50.5%, representing an appreciable shift toward integration in educational settings (Chua & Low, 2024). This increase not only indicates a higher level of acceptance of inclusive practices but also speaks to an increasing need to equip schools, teachers, and support structures with the capacities necessary to successfully interact with an increasingly diverse student population. Despite the significant improvements noted, rapid expansion in inclusive enrollment has been met with growth in challenges related to its implementation. Various major barriers faced by Malaysian teachers in inclusive classrooms, as noted by Ramírez-Forero et al. (2024) include inadequate pedagogical knowledge, a shortage of educational resources, a shortage of training on inclusive pedagogies, and excessive workloads. These findings concur with the worldwide academic literature which depicts inclusive schooling as a complex reform process requiring far-reaching changes in instructor training, curricular changes, and school community collaboration (Yusuf et al., 2025).

A qualitative study by Hosshan (2022) highlights the need to understand general educators' perceptions because their insights play an important role in recognizing the everyday challenges and ideal circumstances required for meaningful inclusion. Research in this area is relatively lacking, especially as far as students who have more than one disability are concerned, whose needs often exceed the scaffolding normally offered in typical classrooms. As an increasing number of students with special needs become registered in general classrooms, an increasing gap emerges between policy and practice at the grassroots level. To meet these needs, the 2013–2025 Malaysian Education Blueprint recognizes inclusive education as one of its 25 strategic targets. This blueprint highlights the need to increase teacher competencies to foster a collaborative culture in schools, ensuring that education initiatives are aligned with global targets such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education for all people. Realizing these ambitions requires more than policy statements, as noted by Abu Bakar and Nordin (2024); it demands ongoing, high-quality professional development that is accessible to both general and special educators, specifically aimed at addressing the changing needs and challenges of students in the classroom.

To achieve this aim, Devolli and Zabeli (2024) call for inquiry that links policy dialog with educational practice, highlighting the need to incorporate sustainable development goals into contextually meaningful educational research. Devolli and Zabeli (2024) reported that the success of inclusive approaches to education relies on their ability to integrate evidence-based approaches into ordinary learning and instructional settings. Despite national and international policies and agreements, large gaps remain between inclusive pedagogy and its implementation practices. For students with multiple disabilities who form one of the most marginalized groups in school systems, gaps are especially evident. This study seeks to fill this gap through an exploration of the perspectives of educators working at the preschool, primary, and secondary school levels who practice inclusive education approaches. This research seeks to uncover the real-life contexts, expectations, and barriers that shape the practice of these educators and thus advance educational policy and methodological advances. Therefore, this study encourages a context-sensitive understanding of inclusive pedagogy on the basis of educators' perspectives and in line with the theoretical underpinnings associated with the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA).

1.1. The aim of the study

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To explore the experiences of in-service teachers who teach students with multiple disabilities in an inclusive education setting.
- ii. To explore teachers' challenges in the inclusive education setting.
- iii. To determine the best practices that are aligned with teachers' expectations and can be adopted to enforce inclusive education in Malaysia.

1.2. Research questions

The research questions that align with the proposed research objectives are as follows:

- i. What are the experiences of in-service teachers who teach students with multiple disabilities in an inclusive education setting?
- ii. What are teachers' challenges when participating in the inclusive education setting?
- iii. What are the best practices that are aligned with teachers' expectations and can be adopted to enforce inclusive education in Malaysia?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the experiences of in-service teachers who taught students with multiple disabilities in inclusive classroom settings. Phenomenology was selected for its capacity to generate rich, detailed narratives of deep subject matter, enabling researchers to capture how people construe complex human phenomena within educational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the approach helped to better understand the systemic, pedagogical, and emotional aspects of inclusive education in Malaysia.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The study situated the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2013). Under IPAA, inclusion is viewed not as fitting students into existing spaces but as restructuring pedagogy to enable all learners to be taught. Three core principles, namely, (1) belief in the capacity of all children to learn, (2) professional responsibility for ever-changing practices, and (3) willingness to work together, are used both for instrument development and interpretation of findings (Brennan et al., 2021).

2.3. Sampling and participants

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants with specific criteria: a minimum of one year of teaching experience in an inclusive classroom with students with multiple disabilities. This approach complements phenomenological research, which emphasizes thick and deep descriptions rather than statistical representations (Smith, 2019). Professional educator networks throughout Malaysia aided in recruitment.

The final sample included ten in-service teachers from different educational levels: preschool, primary, and secondary. Five of the participants were general education teachers who practiced inclusive teaching, and the other five were special education teachers who taught under coteaching arrangements. This balanced composition helped acquire rich data on the dynamics of inclusive teaching from different perspectives.

The participants were considered to have an adequate level of diversity in terms of teaching duration and the inclusiveness of the model (partial versus full inclusion), which broadened the diversity of the perspectives included in the study. With respect to the sample size, the participants were within the limits that are accepted in phenomenological research, which suggests a range of 5-25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.4. Data collection

A Google Forms open-ended survey was conducted over three weeks. This approach provided participants with adequate time and space to reflect on their experiences. The survey consisted of eight open-ended questions that were divided into the following three areas: (1) teaching experiences with students with multiple disabilities; (2) challenges encountered, and support mechanisms utilized; and (3) expectations and perceptions of best practices in inclusive education. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants.

2.5. Instrument and procedures

The instrument was designed via the IPAA model, which framed the study and ensured alignment with the theoretical constructions, thereby enhancing the validity of the study's constructs. Pilot testing was conducted with two educators, which resulted in a few minor changes to the wording, including some contextually relevant explanations. The format as well as the anonymity of the survey was most appropriate as it guaranteed comfort while encouraging in depth, candid responses.

Table 1 The structure of the teachers' demographic data.

No	Designation and Specialization	Type of program	Total Years of Teaching	Years of Teaching in Inclusive Education	Code
1	Secondary teacher (Mainstream)	Partial Inclusive Education	6	6	R1
2	Secondary teacher (Special education)	Partial Inclusive Education	28	8	R2
3	Secondary teacher (Mainstream)	Partial Inclusive Education	14	14	R3
4	Secondary teacher (Special education)	Partial Inclusive Education	14	2	R4
5	Primary teacher (Special education)	Partial Inclusive Education	15	15	R5
6	Preschool teacher (Mainstream)	Full Inclusive Education	7	1	R6
7	Preschool teacher (Mainstream)	Full Inclusive Education	7	1	R7
8	Preschool teacher (Mainstream)	Partial Inclusive Education	8	5	R8
9	Preschool teacher (Mainstream)	Full Inclusive Education	10	3	R9
10	Primary teacher (Special Education)	Partial Inclusive Education	19	19	R10
Total					10

2.6. Data analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis, which process is known for its flexibility and rigor in addressing very complex text data. The phases included the following: (1) immersing in the data, trying to become intimately familiar with the content by going over the responses repeatedly. (2) generate initial codes from identified meaningful text segments; (3) search for themes by clustering together similar codes; (4) review themes with an eye on internal consistency and their answers to both the primary and secondary research questions; (5) define and name themes in alignment with the IPAA framework; and (6) Produce a report consisting of a synthesis of themes with references to applicable literature and concepts. Thematic saturation had ensued by the time the tenth transcript was transcribed and analyzed, as no new codes or themes were generated. Credibility was also enhanced through the process of peer debriefing and the triangulation of relevant literature during interpretation.

3. Results

This study examines the lived experiences, challenges, and expectations of teachers about including students with multiple disabilities in mainstream classrooms in Malaysia. Thematic analysis identified three interconnected themes that addressed each of the questions of study. The Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) themes delved into by identifying professional identities and teachers' needs as they negotiated complex inclusive contexts. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show themes that align with the three research questions provided, highlighting the lived experiences of in-service teachers who actively participate in inclusive education for students with multiple disabilities.

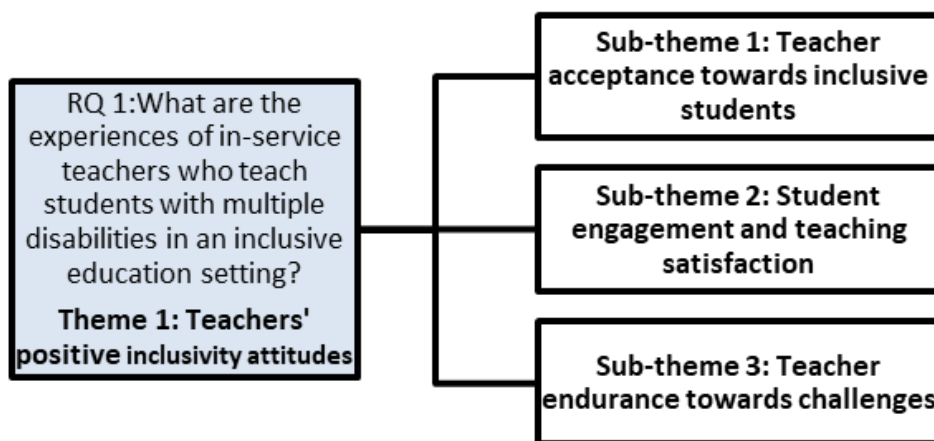


Figure 1 Theme 1 and subthemes align with research question 1.



3.1. Theme one

“Teachers’ positive inclusivity attitudes” was the first theme derived from the findings, which focused on the experiences of in-service teachers who teach students with multiple disabilities in an inclusive education setting. Three subthemes were contained in this theme.

i. Subtheme 1: Teacher acceptance of inclusive students

The teachers expressed their enjoyment and contentment while teaching students with multiple disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Their description in this study reflects the teacher’s acceptance of students’ nature in inclusive education. According to R2, “I enjoy teaching them because I want them to succeed in learning”. The feeling of acceptance is shown through their hopes of seeing students succeed. Another respondent (R4) stated that “I am happy and open to accepting the diversity of inclusive students”. Hence, this expression reflects teachers’ feelings of content and acceptance of inclusive students. R5 said “patience and perseverance,” which indicates empathy toward students in an inclusive setting, as they need to always be patient while teaching them. These statements emphasize that teachers are open to inclusive education.

ii. Subtheme 2: Student engagement and teaching satisfaction

A meaningful occasion occurred during the classroom session, which led the teachers to highlight that an inclusive student was diligent in coming forward in the teaching and learning activities. This finding indicates that teachers experience positive outcomes when they participate in inclusive education. R4 provided this statement by saying, “Inclusive students were brave enough to come forward to answer questions” as their teaching experience. Hence, R2 and R5 both said that “Students can answer exercises independently without help from teachers” and that “Students were able to achieve learning objectives without guidance”. This statement describes student engagement and active participation in the inclusive classroom, which leads to the satisfaction of teachers. “Seeing students smiling and cheerful motives me to continue teaching in an inclusive environment.” R1 also noted that seeing students happy in class increases their motivation to teach and sustains teachers’ commitment to inclusive education.

iii. Subtheme 3: Teacher endurance toward challenges

This subtheme is referred to as theme number one in this study. These findings indicate that teachers need to put extra effort into balancing their overall performance. R1 stated that “I am happy to accept various needs of students, but I feel stressed when adapting to such a heavy workload”. While R9, “At the beginning of teaching in inclusive, I felt a bit stressed because it required a lot of energy to manage the students, but after a few weeks, I started to feel happy owing to the students’ positive performance”. There are mixed findings that illustrate that teachers are stressed and invested in, but their positive attitudes still coexist despite the increase in their workload. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a positive and impactful environment in a school, by helping students feel that they belong in class with a warm attitude (Keerthan et al., 2025). In support of this, a study from (Park et al., 2025) also agreed that if teachers are not able to provide positive learning opportunities to students, this can affect their confidence and lack of self-confidence. In summary, the subthemes that coexist in this first theme are sufficient to conclude that teachers have a positive attitude while working with students with multiple disabilities in the inclusive classroom.

3.2. Theme two

Second, “teachers’ readiness, confidence, and professional development” is the next theme derived from findings that emphasize teachers’ challenges while they participate in inclusive education. There were also three subthemes contained in this theme.

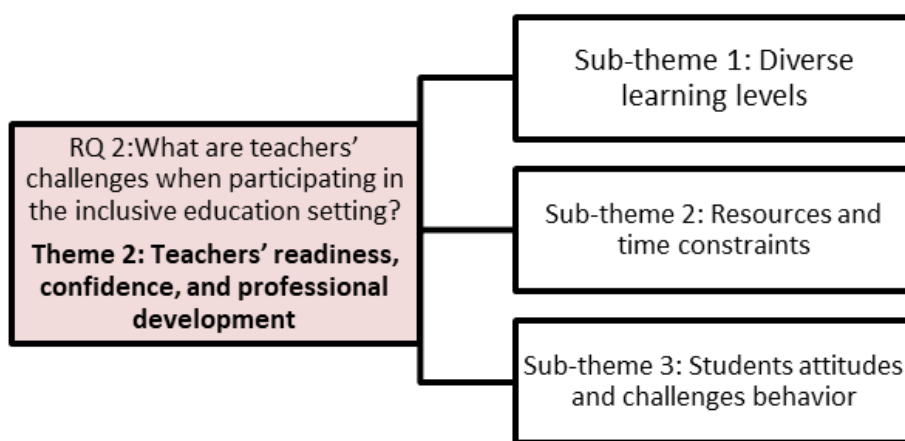


Figure 2 Theme 2 and subthemes align with research question 2.



i. Subtheme 1: Diverse learning levels

There was a wide range of students in the inclusive classroom. Four teachers (R1, R4, R5; R7) indicated that there are different levels of learning in class when inclusive students are involved: "There are different levels of learning". These statements are supported by statements from both R3 and R8: "Some students are unable to manage themselves and nonverbal" and "Learning difficulties...students are slow in writing...the teacher needs to help them read the notes". Finally, R6 states that "Differences in focus and attention (difficulty coping with group instructions)". Almost all the participants agreed that teachers need to cope with the diverse learning levels and needs of students in the inclusive classroom.

ii. Subtheme 2: Resources and time constraints

Second, teachers highlighted that they have resources and time constraints while giving their full commitment to teaching. An extra effort to manage student behavior, plan, and prepare the materials needed when teaching was given by R6 and R9. "Time and attention constraints when teaching students with special needs, along with the need for appropriate teaching aids. These students often disrupt lesson sessions, affecting the focus of other students, and "More attention must be given to these students". This statement is equivalent to R10 which also agreed "A lack of teachers and teacher assistants is blocking students from receiving the necessary support in the inclusive classroom," whereas R2, who performs coteaching in an inclusive classroom, supported other participants' statements as he/she said "Time constraint, as I also teach in the special education class not just in the inclusive class". An inclusive setting seems to double the workload that teachers need to cope with while maintaining their mental and physical readiness.

iii. Subtheme 3: Students' attitudes and challenging behaviors

Students with multiple disabilities also have a regression period. Stress from large transition routines from a special education classroom to an inclusive education classroom can lead to challenging behavior. R1 agreed that teachers need to handle some challenging behavior in the inclusive classroom, as "Students fought in class because their imagination of other peers is mocking them". Hence, R1, "A student who initially refused to follow instructions but eventually responded and began writing, although it is not complete". R4 supports this subtheme by saying that "Most inclusive students need guidance and encouragement from mainstream teachers and peers to help them adapt in the classroom". This statement concludes that teachers need readiness and appropriate training to be involved in inclusive education. In summary, this theme identified challenges that teachers face in the inclusive classroom setting because of their readiness, confidence, and inadequate professional training in teaching students with multiple disabilities that offer a wide range of uniqueness. According to the literature by (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024), teachers may face difficulty if they have limited understanding and knowledge to accommodate the needs of various types of students. This prevents students from being able to improve their academic performance.

3.3. Theme three

"Sustainable inclusivity practice" is the third theme, which contains two subthemes that can highlight best practices and teachers' expectations in inclusive education.

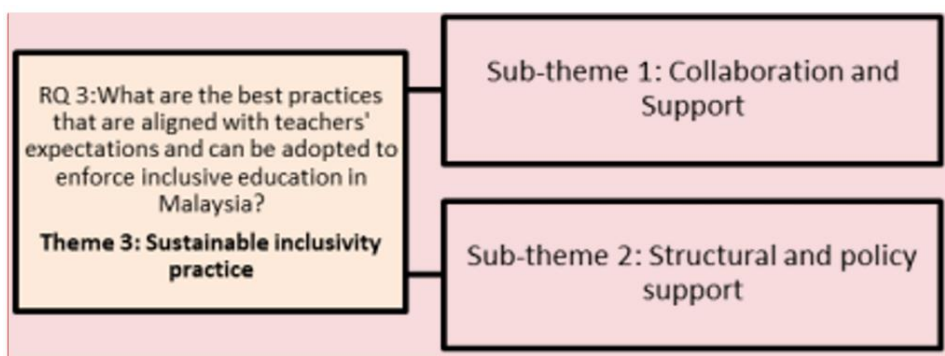


Figure 3 Themes 3 and subthemes align with the research question 3.

i. Subtheme 1: Collaboration and Support

On the basis of these findings, teachers proposed that several practices can be continuously implemented to improve inclusive education. Dividing students into groups can expand mainstream students' awareness of their friends' condition, and then help to build a better community to support an inclusive environment in the future. R4 suggested that teachers should practice peer support and teamwork tasks to empower inclusive education, such as "I use group collaboration with students to support inclusive education". On the other hand, teachers also emphasize the importance of support from all-around stakeholders. Participants R1, R4, R5, and R6 agreed that all people must support this effort as "support from all parties, such



as administrators, school leaders, class teachers, subject teachers, and parents, is essential” in making this successful. R9 and R10 were also stressed in detail in calling out physical assistance during and while inclusive classroom session to make the class smooth, which “(1) classroom assistants are necessary for supporting hands-on activities such as tracing, cutting, and coloring; (2) appropriate teaching aids; and (3) Visual support. R10 noted the need for “administrative cooperation and accessible facilities such as inclusive-friendly toilets, accessible pathways, and appropriate teaching materials for students with disabilities.”. More than half of the participants agreed that collaboration and support from both sides can help to ease their journey in inclusive education.

ii. Subtheme 2: Structural and policy support

There was an urge from teachers to call for more structured development and clear guidelines to improve conducive, inclusive education. R2 and R6 both noted that there is a need to develop structured and holistic support in an inclusive classroom as a “systematic and effective schedule of teaching” and “more structured support”. R1, R4, and R7 also agree that there is a need to provide extra training for teachers to handle the inclusive classroom, which is called “teacher training”. In contrast, there is a need to look in-depth, as some students who do not meet the criteria in an inclusive classroom still enroll in the classroom, which leads to difficulty in managing them. R5 said that “Only students from special education who fit into the criteria fixed in terms of mental age and learning level should be included in an inclusive classroom”. These statements underline that there is a need to revise and review inclusive policy practices, resource planning, workload adjustment, and the development of specific training. To conclude, the mix of findings of practice and support needed by teachers emphasizes a mix of students' ability to learn, coteaching, collaboration among stakeholders, administrative, and organized planning in inclusive education. Supported by a study that highlights teachers' encouragement for several strategies to build inclusive learning environments, a shift in policy and practice, such as family engagement and language support, has led to the transformative power of sustained and community-supported professional development (Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025; Lapidot-Lefler, 2025). Suggestions from teachers who are currently in-service would help Malaysia sustain inclusive practices and move forward toward the best inclusive education practices.

4. Discussion

This study surveys the experiences, challenges, and expectations of teachers in Malaysia when they act as facilitators of inclusive education, namely for students with multiple disabilities. Drawing on the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA), the results highlight how teacher attitudes, professional preparedness, and structural conditions underpin acts of inclusive teaching. The conversation is held around three central pillars: (1) What are the attitudes and effectiveness of teachers?, (2) Challenges in the system and professional development? (3) Structural policy implications

4.1. Teachers' beliefs and the confidence that helps them in their instructional practices

The participants in the study exhibited relatively benign attitudes toward the inclusion of their students with disabilities, and faced considerable instructional logistics. The teachers who are willing to change their approach and have this belief exemplify the IPAA principle of transformability that every learner, including those with multiple disabilities, will progress when given appropriate opportunities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2013). These results also correspond with those of previous studies (Kazmi et al., 2023; Keerthan et al., 2025), which suggest that a high degree of teacher self-efficacy and empathy is positively associated with effective inclusive practices. Nevertheless, these attitudes were accompanied by emotional exhaustion and stress, or the absence of support from a good resource, as there were no adequate lights or seats. This conflict encapsulates the “vulnerability” that Florian and Black-Hawkins(2013) allude to, the fragility of inclusive belief systems when they do not have these underpinning conditions. Therefore, attitudes are a vital colony on their own. In other words, confirming this is critical not only to fostering inclusive mindsets but also to maintaining them in the real world through a great work environment, the way you architect emotionally supportive work.

4.2. Challenges in professional and implementation

The participants identified a lack of specific training on working with students academically delayed as one of the main barriers to managing students with multiple disabilities, especially among general education teachers. This approach is similar to that of Jardinez and Natividad (2024) and Moosa and Bekker (2021), as they mentioned that teachers face difficulties in realizing their inclusive ideals in practice without context-specific knowledge, such as coteaching strategies, differentiated instruction methods, and behavior management. More broadly, teachers in inclusive settings need a range of skills that traditional teacher training fails to ensure. The coexistence of verbal, nonverbal, and cognitively impaired learners in the same classroom underscores the importance of differentiated planning and universal learning design (UDL) principles; however, participants rarely showed explicit exposure to these ideas. If in-service training is available, it can be generic and not applicable to real-classroom complexities. They complement a critique documented in some of the Malaysian teacher preparation literature, which argues that this country separates general and special education tracks and provides little space for interdisciplinary collaboration (Rosmalily & Woollard, 2019). The implications of these results only suggest that high priority

should be placed on re-envisioning preservice and in-service teacher education with practical, inclusive strategies as well as interprofessional training modules.

4.3. Take-on structural and policy implications

The frequent request for more structural investments (i.e., the classroom aids working as paraprofessionals), accessible learning spaces, and on-board administrative support. The results are in accordance with the literature that underscores the necessity for holistic, collaborative work on a whole school and at the multistakeholder level (Almulla et al., 2025; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). While Malaysia has a strong policy on inclusive education (Education Act 1996 and Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025), implementation is not even as it should be, with no systematic alignment. Some teachers even said that their criteria for inclusion were vague or inconsistently enforced. Thus, students with great needs receive little transition planning or support from being thrown into inclusive classrooms. This runs counter to international standards such as SDG4 and CRPD, which emphasize inclusion not just through location (meaningful inclusion focusing on presence and equality rather than mere proximity to learning). Therefore, to achieve real sustainable inclusion, Malaysian education policy needs to wholeheartedly succumb to abandoning access metrics and prioritizing policy coherence and implementation monitoring with teacher agency.

5. Theoretical Contributions

This study extends the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) framework (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2013) by contextualizing its application within Malaysia's special and inclusive education landscape, thereby enriching the theoretical discourse on how inclusive education stakeholders can implement best practices amidst systemic and environmental challenges. Furthermore, it contributes to the broader theoretical literature on inclusive education (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024) by centering the lived experiences of teachers across preschool, primary, and secondary levels, highlighting their unique challenges, pedagogical perspectives, and practical expectations. In doing so, the study addresses a critical gap in existing research, which has largely overlooked teacher narratives within Asian contexts, particularly Malaysia.

6. Practical Contributions

This study presents significant implications for inclusive education practice and policy through a multi-dimensional lens that addresses collaboration, planning, systemic reform, teacher support, and long-term sustainability. Firstly, the findings highlight the necessity of implementing pragmatic, whole-school collaborative strategies that foster the active engagement of all stakeholders, including general educators, special education teachers, school leaders, families, and allied professionals, to support learners with multiple disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Such collaboration must be intentionally cultivated as a unified effort rather than fragmented initiatives, ensuring that inclusive practices are not limited to individual classrooms but embedded across the entire school ecosystem. Secondly, the study emphasizes the need for structured and anticipatory planning before students are placed in inclusive environments. This includes detailed transition routines, individualized educational considerations, and proactive administrative coordination. Pre-planning is critical not only for ensuring a smooth adaptation for students with disabilities but also for equipping educators and support staff with the necessary guidance and resources to foster inclusivity from the outset.

In addition, the study calls for robust educational policy reform, particularly at the Ministry of Education level, where institutional frameworks must reflect the voices of practitioners who navigate the complexities of inclusive education daily. Policymakers are encouraged to co-construct policies with educators, especially special and mainstream teachers, to ensure that policies are both contextually grounded and practically viable. This call for reform extends to improving the mechanisms for teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. Specifically, the study identifies a pressing need for comprehensive training for pre-service and in-service teachers that goes beyond theoretical inclusivity to encompass the realities of classroom implementation, differentiated instruction, and emotional resilience. Furthermore, it advocates for the development of physical and psychological support systems that recognize the demanding nature of inclusive teaching and provide consistent, responsive assistance to educators.

Finally, the research underscores the importance of sustainability in inclusive education. It asserts that short-term interventions or isolated policy shifts are insufficient; instead, there must be a sustained national commitment to inclusivity, anchored in educational reforms that are student-centered and equity-driven. Sustainable implementation requires ongoing evaluation, investment in inclusive infrastructure, and alignment with global best practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). If Malaysia adopts these systemic, long-range strategies with fidelity, the country stands to make transformative progress in building an inclusive educational culture. Collectively, the findings and recommendations from this study offer valuable insights for researchers, educators, policymakers, and families who are invested in nurturing a truly inclusive and equitable learning environment for all learners.

7. Conclusion

The following study is intended to provide a backdrop for in-service teachers empowering inclusive practices in Malaysia. Researchers believe that Malaysian teachers make significant efforts to teach multiple disabilities through inclusive classrooms.

However, if there are systemic barriers against them, they can demotivate teachers from inclusive education, resulting in teachers' negative attitudes toward the subject. The Ministry of Education of Malaysia must assume the key responsibility in ensuring that durable teachers' attitudes and positive, inclusive practices remain. There are other ways that we in Malaysia could also perform reforms with alignment and adaptation of the curriculum to address various learner needs, e.g., reformation policies, suitable training, flexible assessments, and evidence-based practices.

This can provide an external and holistic (big picture) perspective of what teachers are currently dealing with on their day-to-day. The experiences and expectations of our teachers are extremely rich and must not be overlooked; they are the core pillars of our education system. Through key terms of the study (teachers' views), we include opportunities to review the optimal inclusive education "scenario" in Malaysia to identify difficulties in an inclusive environment due to changes in diverse student needs. In conclusion, more research is needed to develop a strong inclusive education system in Malaysia to not only help this country but also serve as an inspiring example for other countries.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank all the participating teachers for their valuable insights and the school administrators for their support. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee, USM (USM/JEPeM/21060847). Academic support from Universiti Sains Malaysia is also gratefully acknowledged.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee USM (HREC), reference no: USM/JEPeM/21060847. Informed consent from all participants was obtained before the start of data collection. There were key ethical protections in place that included the right to opt out of the study at any time (without penalty), anonymity, and confidentiality guarantees. All the data were securely stored and only used for educational purposes, according to the institution's research ethics protocols.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive any financial support.

References

- Abu Bakar, N. H., & Nordin, M. N. (2024). Inclusive education programs in Malaysia: Teachers' challenges in implementation. *Special Education (SE)*, 2(1), e0017. <https://doi.org/10.59055/se.v2i1.17>
- Almulla, A. A., Aftab, M. J., & Amjad, F. (2025). Creating inclusive early childhood education environments: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i1.579>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brennan, A., King, F., & Travers, J. (2021). Supporting the enactment of inclusive pedagogy in a primary school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(13), 1540–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1625452>
- Chua, T. S., & Low, H. M. (2024). Inclusive education: Perception, practice and implementation within Malaysia. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bitara UPSI*, 17, 126–134. <https://doi.org/10.37134/bitara.vol17.sp.13.2024>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Devolli, A., & Zabeli, N. (2024). Attitudes of parents of children with special needs towards inclusive education. *Human Research in Rehabilitation*, 14(1), 208–223. <https://doi.org/10.21554/hrr.042419>
- Etscheidt, S. L., Hernandez-Saca, D., & Voulgarides, C. K. (2024). Monitoring the transition requirements of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act: A critique and a proposal to expand the performance indicators. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073231177407>
- Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2013). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096>
- Horn, E., & Kang, J. (2012). Supporting young children with multiple disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 31(4), 241–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121411426487>
- Hosshan, H. (2022). Perspectives of teachers on supporting the participation of students with learning disabilities in inclusive secondary schools: A qualitative study. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education*, 37(1), 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.21315/apjee2022.37.1.3>
- Jardinez, M. J., & Natividad, L. R. (2024). The advantages and challenges of inclusive education: Striving for equity in the classroom. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 12(2), 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v12i2.7182>
- Jelas, Z. M., & Mohd Ali, M. (2014). Inclusive education in Malaysia: Policy and practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(10), 991–1003. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.693398>
- Kazmi, A. B., Kamran, M., & Siddiqui, S. (2023). The effect of teachers' attitudes in supporting inclusive education by catering to diverse learners. *Frontiers in Education*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1083963>



- Keerthan, K. S., Gunjawate, D. R., Ravi, R., & Kumar, K. (2025). Exploring teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards the inclusion of children with hearing impairment in mainstream education: A systematic review. *International Journal of Pediatric Otorhinolaryngology*, *190*, 112255. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijporl.2025.112255>
- Lapidot-Lefler, N. (2025). Teacher responsiveness in inclusive education: A participatory study of pedagogical practice, well-being, and sustainability. *Sustainability*, *17*(7), 2919. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17072919>
- Moosa, M., & Bekker, T. (2021). Initial teacher education students' conceptualisation of inclusive education. *Journal of Education*, *85*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i85a03>
- Park, E., McKay, L., Carrington, S., & Harper-Hill, K. (2025). Using hope theory to understand changes from professional learning in inclusive education. *British Educational Research Journal*, *51*(1), 299–320. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4076>
- Ramírez-Forero, B. I., Arroyo-Rojas, F., Martínez-Rivera, S., Noreña-Osorno, M. S., Correia de Campos, L. F. C., Nowland, L., & Haegele, J. (2024). Barriers and facilitators to the inclusion of autistic students in integrated physical education: A Colombian perspective. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, *29*(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2024.2399376>
- Rapp, A. C., & Corral-Granados, A. (2024). Understanding inclusive education: A theoretical contribution from system theory and the constructionist perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *28*(4), 423–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1946725>
- Rosmalily, S., & Woollard, J. (2019). Towards inclusive training for inclusive education (Teachers' views about effective professional development for promoting inclusive education). In *Proceedings of the 13th annual International Technology, Education and Development Conference (INTED 2019)*, Valencia, Spain. <https://doi.org/10.37134/bitara.vol12.sp.8.2019>
- Salleh, R., & Woollard, J. (2019). Inclusive education: Equality and equity (Teachers' views about inclusive education in Malaysia's primary schools). *Jurnal Pendidikan Bitara UPSI*, *12*, 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.37134/bitara.vol12.sp.8.2019>
- Smith, J. A. (2019). Participants and researchers searching for meaning: Conceptual developments for interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *16*(2), 166–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1540648>
- Uribe-Zarain, X., Hellman, A. B., & Bell, A. B. (2025). Transforming teacher attitudes and practices: The efficacy of sustained professional development in culturally responsive education. *TESOL Journal*, *16*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.896>
- Yusuf, M., Mai, M. Y. M., Garba, S. A., Aroyewun, T. F., Perveen, A., & Babatunde, B. N. (2025). Challenges of Edu 4.0 in inclusive education: A qualitative analysis with quantified qualitative data. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, *24*(1), 481–499. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.1.24>