From Theory to Practice:
How Saudi Teachers Perceive Their Training for Inclusive Classrooms

By

Dr. Ahmed Alqahtani

Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University

Department of Curriculum & Instructions

ORCID ID :https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9505-9103

From Theory to Practice: How Saudi Teachers Perceive Their Training for Inclusive Classrooms

Dr. Ahmed Alqahtani

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how Saudi general education teachers perceive their preparation—both before entering the classroom and through ongoing professional development—for implementing inclusive education practices. Based on interviews with six teachers from inclusive public schools in Jeddah, the study explores whether current training programs align with the practical demands of teaching in diverse classrooms.

Findings revealed two major issues: pre-service education was mostly theoretical and lacked hands-on opportunities to apply inclusive strategies, while in-service training was described as irregular, superficial, and disconnected from classroom realities. Teachers reported feeling unprepared, particularly in adapting lessons, managing mixed-ability classrooms, and collaborating with special education staff. These gaps created a mismatch between the inclusive vision promoted by national policies and the actual readiness of teachers to implement it in practice.

The study underscores the need for cohesive training approaches that integrate general and special education, embed inclusive strategies into core teacher preparation, and provide sustained, context-specific professional development. Implications for improving teacher training systems in Saudi Arabia are discussed.

Keywords: inclusive education, teacher preparation, pre-service training, in-service professional development، general education teachers

من النظرية إلى التطبيق: كيف ينظر المعلمون السعوديون إلى تدريبهم على الفصول الدراسية الشاملة

د/ أحمـد القحطانـي

مستخلـص الـدراسـة

تستكشف هذه الدراسة النوعية تصوّرات معلمي التعليم العام في السعودية حول مستوى جاهزيتهم للتدريس في الفصول الشاملة، سواء من خلال إعدادهم قبل الالتحاق بالمهنة أو عبر برامج التطوير المهني أثناء الخدمة. استندت الدراسة إلى مقابلات أُجريت مع ستة معلمين من مدارس حكومية شاملة في مدينة جدة، بهدف تقييم مدى توافق برامج الإعداد الحالية مع متطلبات التدريس في بيئات تعليمية متنوعة.

أظهرت النتائج وجود جانبين رئيسيين من القصور: الأول، أن إعداد المعلمين قبل الخدمة اتسم بطابعه النظري، مع محدودية فرص التطبيق العملي لاستراتيجيات التعليم الشامل. أما الثاني، فتمثّل في أن برامج التدريب أثناء الخدمة كانت متقطعة، سطحية، وغير مرتبطة بواقع الفصول الدراسية. وقد انعكس ذلك على شعور المعلمين بعدم الجاهزية، خاصة في مجالات تكييف الدروس، وإدارة الفصول التي تضم طلاب مختلفين في حاجاتهم التعليمية، وبناء شراكات فعّالة مع معلمي التربية الخاصة. وأسفر هذا القصور عن فجوة واضحة بين الطموح لخلق بيئة تعليمية شاملة، والقدرة الفعلية للمعلمين على تجسيدها في الميدان.

وتظهر الدراسة الحاجة إلى تبني نهج تدريبي متكامل يدمج بين التعليم العام والتربية الخاصة، ويضمن تضمين استراتيجيات التعليم الشامل في المقررات الأساسية لإعداد المعلم، مع توفير تطوير مهني مستمر ومرتبط بسياق العمل المدرسي. كما تناقش الدراسة دلالات هذه النتائج على تحسين أنظمة إعداد المعلمين في السعودية.

Introduction

Problem statement

The expansion of inclusive education in saudi arabia has placed new expectations on general education teachers to address the needs of diverse learners. However, many enter the profession with pre-service preparation that is primarily theoretical and lacks practical application of inclusive strategies. In-service professional development, intended to bridge this gap, is often irregular, superficial, and disconnected from classroom realities. These shortcomings create a persistent gap between the inclusive vision outlined in national policies and teachers' actual readiness to implement inclusive practices.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to explore how saudi general education teachers perceive their readiness to teach in inclusive classrooms, focusing on two stages of professional preparation: pre-service education and in-service training. The goal is to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in teacher training systems to better align preparation with the practical demands of inclusive education.

Definition of terms

Students with special needs: learners who require special education due to learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, or emotional difficulties.

Inclusion:

the practice of educating students with and without disabilities together in general education classrooms, with necessary supports to ensure equitable access to learning.

Inclusive education practices:

teaching strategies and approaches designed to address the needs of diverse learners, ensuring active participation and meaningful learning for all students.

Pre-service teacher preparation:

formal training and education undertaken before entering the teaching profession, including coursework and supervised teaching practice.

In-service teacher training:

professional development provided to practicing teachers to enhance their knowledge, skills, and ability to implement inclusive teaching strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1 the role of teacher preparation in inclusive education inclusive education today goes beyond supporting only students with disabilities. It now refers to making sure that all students regardless of their background, language, or learning ability, can learn together in the same classroom. This broader view of inclusion puts more responsibility on schools and, most importantly, on teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners (ainscow, 2020).

Because of this, teacher preparation plays a central role in shaping how confident and capable teachers feel in inclusive settings. Their beliefs about

inclusion, the strategies they use, and their willingness to adapt are all linked to the kind of training they receive. When teacher education lacks a strong focus on inclusion, many teachers feel unsure about how to support students with different needs (scruggs & mastropieri, 2017; forlin & chambers, 2011). Recent studies in the saudi context have echoed these concerns, emphasizing gaps in both theoretical and practical aspects of pre-service preparation (alharbi & alodaidani, 2024; almughyiri, 2024).

2.2 pre-service training: gaps in practice

Pre-service programs are meant to prepare teachers before they enter the profession. However, in many cases including in saudi arabia, these programs focus heavily on theory, while offering few practical opportunities to experience or apply inclusive practices (konza, 2008).

Recent studies have echoed these concerns in the saudi context, showing that despite growing attention to inclusive education, most teacher preparation programs still lack practical components. For example, abu-alghayth (2024) found that university faculty view current pre-service programs as insufficient in preparing teachers to handle diverse classrooms. Similarly, alshahrani and abu-alghayth (2025) reported that the disconnect between theory and practice remains a key barrier to effective inclusive teaching in saudi schools.

In saudi universities, inclusive education is not always included as part of the core curriculum for general education majors. When it is addressed, it tends to be in a general or abstract way, and without coordination between general and special education departments (aldabas, 2015; alquraini, 2011). This often leads to a gap between what teachers' study and what they later

face in real classrooms, especially when teaching students with disabilities or learning differences.

2.3 in-service training: limited and inconsistent

In-service professional development is supposed to help teachers grow throughout their careers. Yet, many saudi teachers describe these experiences as short, disconnected from practice, and rarely followed up with support (blanton et al., 2018).

Research shows that effective in-service training should be ongoing, practical, and closely connected to what teachers do in their classrooms (darling-hammond, 2010). When training is presented in the form of lectures or general information sessions, it does little to improve inclusive teaching. Instead, it may reinforce the gap between what teachers know and what they are expected to do.

2.4 divisions within teacher education

One of the challenges facing inclusive education is the continued division between general education and special education in teacher training programs. This separation limits collaboration and keeps many general education teachers from learning about the tools or strategies used in special education (blanton et al., 2018).

In saudi arabia, such divisions are often exacerbated by national education policies that emphasize inclusion at the policy level but fail to translate these goals into reforms within teacher preparation institutions (aldabas, 2015). As a result, teachers are increasingly expected to apply inclusive practices without having been adequately trained to do so during their studies.

Some scholars have called for more integrated training programs where all teachers regardless of their specialization are introduced to inclusive teaching from the start. This could help ensure that every teacher has at least a basic understanding of how to support diverse students in their classrooms.

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to understand how general education teachers in saudi arabia view their preparation for inclusive education. Because the goal was to explore personal experiences and individual perceptions, i conducted semi-structured interviews with selected teachers. This method gave participants space to explain their views in depth, particularly regarding the training they received, both before starting their teaching careers and during their time in service, and how prepared they felt to meet the needs of diverse learners in inclusive classrooms.

3.1 participants and sampling

The study took place in jeddah, saudi arabia, and included six general education teachers working in public schools that apply inclusive education. All participants had graduated from saudi teacher preparation programs within the last five years and were currently teaching in classrooms that include students with special needs.

I selected participants using purposive sampling to make sure they had relevant experience with inclusion. I began by reaching out to teachers i already knew from my professional network, many of whom worked in inclusive schools. To expand the sample, i also used snowball sampling, asking participants to recommend others who met the same criteria. This

approach helped build trust, which i found important for encouraging honest and open responses during the interviews.

3.2 data collection

I collected data through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, which were conducted online using zoom. Each interview lasted around 60 minutes and was audio-recorded after getting the participants' consent.

The interview questions were open-ended and focused on two main areas: teachers' experiences with pre-service preparation such as coursework and practicum, and their exposure to in-service professional development, like training sessions or workshops.

During the interviews, i also used follow-up questions to explore points the participants raised and to clarify their answers. The conversations gave teachers space to reflect on how prepared they felt to teach in inclusive classrooms, and many of them shared specific examples from their teaching experience.

3.3 data analysis

I used thematic analysis, following the steps described by braun and clarke (2019), to make sense of the data. After each interview was transcribed, i read through the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the content. I then started coding the data inductively, looking for recurring ideas and key phrases that stood out.

Once the initial codes were identified, i grouped them into larger themes that reflected the main focus of the study. I also made sure to separate teachers' comments about pre-service preparation from those about in-service training. To help manage and organize the coding process, i used nvivo software.

3.4 trustworthiness

To support the credibility of the study, i used member checking by sharing summaries of the interview transcripts with participants. They were invited to confirm whether the interpretations reflected their views accurately, and a few offered small clarifications that i included.

I also aimed to provide detailed, context-rich descriptions of the teachers' experiences to help readers understand the settings and judge whether the findings might apply in similar contexts.

Throughout the analysis, i kept a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, choices, and potential biases. This helped me stay aware of how my background and assumptions might influence the way i interpreted the data.

4. Findings

From the interview data, two key themes emerged about how teachers experienced their preparation for inclusive classrooms:

1- lack of practical training during their pre-service education, and

2- in-service training that was inconsistent and often superficial.

These two areas highlight what many participants described as a clear mismatch between the policies promoting inclusive education and the actual support they received in their preparation and professional development.

4.1 limited practical training during pre-service education

Many of the teachers i interviewed said that their university preparation gave them little exposure to inclusive education in practice. Although a few remembered hearings about inclusion in lectures, most said that the discussion stayed theoretical. They were not shown how to adjust

lessons, manage mixed-ability classrooms, or work with special education staff in real settings.

Some teachers noted that inclusion was only briefly mentioned in general courses or offered as a separate elective that felt disconnected from the rest of their training. As one teacher put it: "we had maybe one lecture where they told us what inclusion means, but it wasn't something they showed us how to do. It felt like a definition, not a practice."

Another teacher spoke about their teaching practicum: "during our teaching practice, we never had to deal with students with special needs. It was always regular classes. So when i entered my current school, it was the first time i had to figure things out on my own."

This gap between theory and practice left many participants feeling unsure and underprepared during their early years of teaching. A few appreciated professors who spoke positively about inclusion, but they agreed that these ideas rarely translated into something they could use in the classroom.

4.2 superficial and sporadic in-service professional development

Although teachers had more exposure to training during their careers than during university, they still described most in-service sessions as unhelpful. Many said the sessions were short, lecture-style, and had little to do with what they faced in the classroom.

As one teacher put it:"they give us slides and talk for an hour. Then we go back to the classroom, and nothing changes. It's not enough."

Another participant explained that the training often missed the real challenges:

"we need help with things like how to adapt the lesson for a student who can't read well or who needs extra time. But the training talks about general things and then moves on."

Teachers also mentioned that there was no follow-up after these sessions. Once the workshop ended, they were on their own. There was no system in place to help them try out the strategies, ask questions, or get feedback later on.

5. Discussion

The results of this study point to a clear gap between what national policies in saudi arabia promote about inclusive education and what teachers actually experience in their preparation, both before and during their careers. This gap is not just about missing content in training programs, but also about how inclusion is understood and approached. For many teachers, their preparation felt disconnected, with little emphasis on practical strategies or real classroom situations.

5.1 pre-service education: theoretical without practical depth

Many participants said that their university programs introduced inclusive education only at a surface level. The idea was explained in lectures, but they were not shown how to apply it in real classrooms. This matches what other researchers have noted about teacher education in saudi arabia, that general and special education are often taught separately, with little connection between them (aldabas, 2015; alquraini, 2011). Without practical training, like adapting lessons, modifying classroom activities, or working with students with different needs, teachers felt unprepared when they entered the profession.This also contrasts with bandura's social learning theory, which suggests that people learn best when they observe and practice skills in real situations (nabavi, 2012). Since many teachers had no chance to watch or try inclusive teaching strategies during their studies, they started their careers without a clear model to follow.

5.2 in-service training: irregular and disconnected

Participants described most of their in-service training as limited and disconnected from the realities of their classrooms. While inclusion was sometimes mentioned in workshops, the sessions often lacked depth, follow-up, or chances to work with colleagues. From the view of social systems theory (rapp & corral-granados, 2021), inclusive education needs coordination between schools, training providers, and policymakers. But the teachers' experiences suggest that these parts are not working together. The ministry may promote inclusion in its policies, but training programs and school support systems don't always follow through. Many teachers also said there was no real link between general and special education in their schools. They worked alone instead of sharing strategies or solving problems together. This lack of connection weakens the support system teachers need to apply inclusive practices with confidence.

5.3 confidence, identity, and readiness

Beyond the training gaps, several teachers talked about how unpreparedness affected their confidence. Some felt anxious or discouraged when facing students with needs they didn't know how to meet. This echoes other research showing that teachers with little preparation for inclusion often feel less effective and are more likely to leave the profession (berry et al., 2011).On the other hand, a few teachers said they learned a lot informally, by watching colleagues, asking questions, or trying things out. These small moments helped them feel more capable, which supports the idea in social learning theory that seeing others model inclusive teaching can build skills and self-belief over time.

6. Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for how teachers in saudi arabia are prepared and supported to teach in inclusive classrooms. As the country works toward a more inclusive education system, there is a need to rethink how teacher preparation, both before and during service is structured.

6.1 improving pre-service teacher education

Pre-service programs need to do more than introduce inclusion in one or two lectures. Instead, inclusive teaching should be part of all core education courses. This could include:

Adding inclusive strategies to lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment courses.

Making sure student teaching experiences include time in classrooms where students with special needs are present.

Creating partnerships between teacher colleges and inclusive schools so students can learn in real settings. These changes would help future teachers connect theory to practice and feel more confident when they start teaching.

6.2 making in-service training more practical

Many teachers said that current in-service workshops feel disconnected from their everyday work. To be more useful, professional development should:

Focus on the actual challenges teachers face.

Include mentoring, coaching, and time to plan or reflect with other teachers.

Allow teachers to watch real examples of inclusive teaching and receive feedback on their own work.

Also, general and special education staff should be trained together and encouraged to work as a team, so teachers don't feel they are handling inclusion alone.

6.3 preparing all teachers for inclusion

Right now, there is a gap between how general and special education teachers are trained. This makes collaboration harder and puts all the responsibility for inclusion on just a few people. Instead, all teachers should receive training in inclusive strategies from the start. When all teachers feel prepared to work with diverse students, inclusion becomes a shared responsibility—not something left to specialists only.

6.4 connecting policy with practice

Finally, policymakers need to make sure that what is written in national reforms is supported in teacher preparation programs. This means reviewing how teachers are licensed, what content is taught in education programs, and how training quality is monitored. If these pieces don't work together, inclusion risks becoming just an idea on paper, without real change in classrooms.

7. Conclusion

As saudi arabia moves forward with its efforts to make education more inclusive, it becomes clear that the role of general education teachers is central to making this vision a reality. This study showed that although inclusion is gaining attention in national policies, many teachers still feel underprepared, both in terms of what they learned during university and the support they receive later through professional development.

Pre-service programs often offer little more than a brief introduction to inclusive education, and in-service training tends to be disconnected from everyday classroom challenges. As a result, teachers may enter the profession without the tools or confidence they need to support students with different learning needs.

Bridging this gap will require changes across the system. Teacher preparation needs to be more practical, connected to real classrooms, and shared across both general and special education. When teachers are supported in this way, they are more likely to feel ready to include every learner—not just in theory, but in their daily practice.

References

Abu-alghayth, k. M. (2024). University faculty views on critical skills for promoting inclusive classrooms in saudi arabia. International journal of inclusive education.

Ainscow, m. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences. Nordic journal of studies in educational policy, 6(1), 7–16.

Aldabas, r. A. (2015). Special education in saudi arabia: a synthesis of literature. International journal of special education, 30(3), 86–92.

Alharbi, m. S., & alodaidani, h. K. (2024). Early-career special education teachers' perceptions of their preparation for inclusive classrooms in saudi arabia. Frontiers in education, 9, 1405071.

Almughyiri, s. (2024). Special education teacher preparation in saudi arabia: preservice teachers' perspectives on practicum and instructional strategies. The qualitative report, 29(3), 793–810.

Alquraini, t. (2011). Special education programs in saudi arabia: issues and recommendations. Journal of the international association of special education, 12(1), 1–7.

Alshahrani, b., & abu-alghayth, k. M. (2025). Inclusive education practices for students with intellectual disability in saudi arabia: bridging gaps for better support systems. International journal of developmental disabilities.

Bandura, a. (1965). Influence of models' reinforcement contingencies on the acquisition of imitative responses. Journal of personality and social psychology, 1(6), 589–595.

Blanton, l. P., pugach, m. C., & florian, l. (2018). Teacher education for inclusion: changing paradigms and practices. Routledge.

Braun, v., & clarke, v. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health, 11(4), 589–597.

Darling-hammond, l. (2010). The flat world and education: how america's commitment to equity will determine our future. Teachers college press.

Forlin, c., & chambers, d. (2011). Teacher preparation for inclusive education: increasing knowledge but raising concerns. Asia-pacific journal of teacher education, 39(1), 17–32.

Rapp, w., & corral-granados, a. (2021). Understanding systems theory in education. Educational review, 73(1), 99–114.

Scruggs, t. E., & mastropieri, m. A. (2017). Inclusive education: a case for co-teaching. Journal of special education, 50(3), 186–195.