



Teacher Perceptions and Practices in Identifying Students with Differential Needs

Dr. Mukta

Principal, Hermann Gmeiner Degree College, Bhimtal (Nainital)

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15858162>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 25-06-2025

Published: 10-07-2025

Keywords:

*Differential Learning
Needs, Teacher
Perceptions, Identification
Practices, Student Diversity*

ABSTRACT

In contemporary classrooms, the diversity of student learning profiles presents a significant challenge for educators striving to provide equitable and effective instruction. This descriptive study explores existing literature to examine how teachers perceive and respond to the varied educational needs of their students. Drawing upon secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and educational frameworks, the study highlights the role of teacher awareness, professional training, and classroom experience in identifying differential needs. It discusses common indicators used by teachers such as academic performance, behavioural cues, and social interactions to recognize students requiring tailored support. The findings suggest that while many educators demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusive practices, systemic barriers such as limited resources, lack of specialized training, and time constraints often hinder accurate identification and intervention. The study emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development and institutional support in enhancing teachers' capacity to address diverse learner needs effectively. By synthesizing existing research, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the practical and perceptual dimensions of differentiated instruction in mainstream education.



1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of education, classrooms have become increasingly diverse, not only in terms of cultural and linguistic backgrounds but also in the range of students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural profiles. This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for educators, particularly in identifying and addressing the differential needs of students. The concept of "differential needs" refers to the varying academic, social, emotional, and physical requirements that students bring into the learning environment. These needs may stem from a variety of factors, including learning disabilities, giftedness, socio-economic status, language barriers, or emotional and behavioural disorders. Recognizing and responding to these needs is essential for fostering an inclusive and equitable educational experience for all learners.

Teachers play a pivotal role in this process. As the primary facilitators of learning, they are often the first to observe signs that a student may require additional support or a modified instructional approach. Their perceptions shaped by their training, experiences, beliefs, and the institutional context significantly influence how they identify and respond to students with differential needs. However, the process of identification is complex and multifaceted. It involves not only recognizing observable behaviours and academic performance but also interpreting these indicators within the broader context of each student's background and circumstances.

The importance of accurately identifying students with differential needs cannot be overstated. Early and appropriate identification can lead to timely interventions, which are critical for preventing academic failure, social isolation, and emotional distress. Conversely, failure to recognize these needs can result in students being misunderstood, mislabelled, or neglected, thereby exacerbating existing challenges and widening educational disparities. Despite this, many teachers report feeling underprepared or unsupported in their efforts to identify and address diverse student needs effectively. This gap between expectation and preparedness underscores the need for a deeper understanding of teacher perceptions and practices in this area.

This study seeks to explore how teachers perceive and practice the identification of students with differential needs, using a descriptive research design based on secondary data. By synthesizing existing literature, policy documents, and educational frameworks, the study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of teacher engagement with student diversity. It also seeks to highlight the



systemic and contextual factors that influence teacher practices, including access to professional development, availability of resources, and institutional support structures.

The rationale for focusing on teacher perceptions is grounded in the recognition that beliefs and attitudes significantly shape educational practices. Teachers who view student diversity as an asset are more likely to adopt inclusive strategies and seek out ways to support all learners. On the other hand, those who perceive differential needs as burdensome or beyond their capacity may be less proactive in identifying and addressing them. Understanding these perceptions is therefore crucial for designing effective training programs and support systems that empower teachers to meet the needs of all students.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of examining actual classroom practices. While policy frameworks and theoretical models provide valuable guidance, it is the day-to-day actions of teachers that ultimately determine the quality of educational experiences for students with differential needs. These practices may include informal observations, the use of formative assessments, collaboration with colleagues and specialists, and the adaptation of instructional materials and methods. By analysing these practices through the lens of existing research, the study aims to identify both effective strategies and common challenges faced by educators.

The use of secondary data in this study allows for a broad and nuanced understanding of the topic. Rather than collecting new empirical data, the research draws on a wide range of existing sources to identify patterns, themes, and insights that have emerged across different contexts and educational systems. This approach is particularly valuable in highlighting best practices, identifying gaps in current knowledge, and informing future research and policy development.

One of the key themes that emerges from the literature is the need for ongoing professional development. Many studies highlight that while initial teacher education provides a foundation, it is often insufficient for equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge required to address the full spectrum of student needs. Continuous learning opportunities, including workshops, peer collaboration, and access to expert guidance, are essential for building teacher capacity in this area. Additionally, institutional support such as manageable class sizes, access to specialized staff, and inclusive school cultures plays a critical role in enabling teachers to implement effective identification and intervention strategies.

Another important consideration is the role of assessment in identifying differential needs. While standardized tests can provide useful data, they often fail to capture the full range of student abilities and



challenges. Teachers frequently rely on formative assessments, classroom observations, and student interactions to gather more holistic and context-sensitive information. However, the effectiveness of these methods depends on the teacher's ability to interpret and act on the data, which in turn is influenced by their training, experience, and support systems.

Furthermore, the study acknowledges the influence of cultural and contextual factors on teacher perceptions and practices. In some educational settings, there may be stigma associated with certain types of needs, leading to under-identification or misidentification. In others, resource constraints may limit the availability of diagnostic tools and support services. These variations highlight the importance of context-sensitive approaches that take into account the unique challenges and opportunities within each educational environment.

2. Review of Literature

To comprehend the breadth and depth of earlier research pertaining to the current subject, a comprehensive review of the body of existing literature is necessary. The literature has been divided into national and international studies for the sake of clarity and applicability.

2.1 International Studies

Kupers et al. (2023) This study explored how Dutch vocational teachers differentiate instruction for students with special educational needs (SEN). Although teachers expressed intentions to adapt lessons, actual classroom interactions showed limited differentiation, especially for students with behavioural or motivational challenges.

Onyishi & Sefotho (2020) Using a survey of 382 primary teachers, this study found that while teachers understood the value of differentiated instruction (DI), its implementation was minimal due to time constraints, lack of training, and overcrowded classrooms. Teachers requested more support and resources to apply DI effectively.

Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) They introduced the concept of "inclusive pedagogy," advocating for teaching strategies that accommodate all learners from the outset. Their work emphasized that differentiation should be proactive, not reactive, and rooted in a belief in every student's potential.

Tomlinson (2014) Tomlinson's foundational work on DI stressed that teacher beliefs about student capability directly influence their instructional choices. She argued that effective differentiation requires intentional planning and a deep understanding of student diversity.



Avramidis & Norwich (2002) This meta-analysis revealed that teachers with prior experience and training in inclusive education held more positive attitudes toward students with special needs. However, many still felt inadequately prepared to meet diverse classroom demands.

De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert (2011) Their study found that while teachers supported inclusive education in principle, they often lacked confidence and resources to identify and support students with complex learning profiles, highlighting a gap between policy and practice.

Loreman et al. (2007) Canadian teachers reported that collaborative planning and access to special educators significantly improved their ability to identify and support students with differential needs. The study emphasized the importance of teamwork in inclusive settings.

Mitchell (2015) Mitchell reviewed evidence-based strategies for inclusive education, including peer tutoring and formative assessment. He concluded that these methods help teachers identify student needs more accurately and tailor instruction accordingly.

Subban (2006) This literature review found that successful differentiation depends heavily on teacher readiness, ongoing professional development, and administrative support. Without these, even well-intentioned teachers struggle to implement DI effectively.

Hattie (2009) In his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses, Hattie identified formative assessment and teacher clarity as key factors in recognizing and addressing student needs. His work supports the idea that data-driven teaching enhances differentiation.

2.2 National Studies

Kumar & Saikia (2020) This study found that while teachers in Assam were aware of inclusive education principles, many lacked the practical skills to identify and support students with differential needs. Training gaps and resource shortages were major barriers.

Sharma & Das (2015) Pre-service teachers showed improved attitudes toward inclusion after targeted training. The study highlighted the effectiveness of experiential learning and workshops in preparing future educators for diverse classrooms.

Rao (2019) Rao's research revealed that private school teachers were more likely to use differentiated strategies than government school teachers. The disparity was attributed to differences in training, class size, and access to teaching aids.



Narayana & Reddy (2017) Teachers often relied on informal observations to identify learning difficulties due to the lack of formal diagnostic tools. The study emphasized the need for structured assessment frameworks in Indian schools.

Bhatnagar & Das (2014) This study found that Indian teachers in inclusive classrooms faced challenges such as large class sizes and limited support staff. These factors hindered their ability to identify and respond to individual student needs effectively.

Kaur (2018) Kaur emphasized the role of continuous professional development in enhancing teachers' ability to recognize diverse learning needs. Her study showed that regular workshops and peer mentoring improved classroom practices.

Joshi & Thomas (2021) Teachers with access to resource rooms and special educators felt more confident in identifying students with differential needs. The study advocated for integrated support systems within schools to aid teachers.

Mehta & Kumar (2016) This study found that many teachers equated differential needs solely with disabilities, overlooking other factors like socio-economic status and language barriers. It called for broader awareness in teacher training programs.

Saxena (2022) Teacher education modules on inclusive education were found to be overly theoretical, lacking practical application. Saxena recommended revising curricula to include hands-on strategies for identifying and supporting diverse learners.

Chakraborty & Banerjee (2018) Schools with supportive leadership had more proactive teachers in identifying and addressing student needs. The study highlighted the importance of school culture and leadership in fostering inclusive practices.

3. Findings and Discussion

A. Teacher Perceptions

(i) Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education: Teachers generally express positive attitudes toward the concept of inclusive education, recognizing its importance in promoting equity and access for all learners. Many educators believe that every child deserves an opportunity to learn in a mainstream setting. However, these attitudes are often influenced by their level of training, prior experience with diverse learners, and the support they receive from their institutions. In contexts where inclusive



education is well-supported, teachers tend to be more confident and proactive. Conversely, in under-resourced settings, enthusiasm may be tempered by practical challenges.

(ii) Awareness of Student Diversity: Teachers demonstrate varying levels of awareness regarding the diversity of student needs in their classrooms. While most educators can identify visible differences such as physical disabilities or language barriers, subtler needs like emotional challenges, learning disabilities, or giftedness are often overlooked. Awareness is closely linked to professional development and exposure to inclusive pedagogies. Teachers who receive ongoing training are more likely to recognize and respond to a broader spectrum of student needs.

B. Identification Practices

(i) Common Strategies Used in Classrooms: Teachers employ a range of strategies to identify students with differential needs. These include:

- Observation of classroom behaviour and participation
- Monitoring academic performance and progress
- Engaging in informal conversations with students
- Collaborating with parents and colleagues
- Using differentiated tasks to gauge learning styles and abilities

These strategies are often intuitive and based on the teacher's experience. However, their effectiveness depends on the teacher's ability to interpret student responses accurately and consistently.

C. Role of Informal vs. Formal Assessments

Informal assessments—such as classroom observations, anecdotal records, and student interactions—are widely used due to their flexibility and immediacy. Teachers often rely on these methods to make quick judgments about student needs. Formal assessments, including standardized tests and diagnostic tools, are less frequently used, especially in resource-constrained settings. While formal tools offer reliability and structure, they may not always capture the nuanced needs of individual students. A balanced approach that integrates both informal and formal assessments is ideal but not always feasible.

D. Challenges Faced

(i) Institutional and Personal Barriers: Teachers face several barriers in identifying and supporting students with differential needs:



▪ **Institutional Barriers**

- Large class sizes limit individual attention.
- Lack of access to special educators or resource rooms.
- Inadequate training in inclusive education.
- Absence of structured support systems and policies.

▪ **Personal Barriers**

- Limited confidence in handling diverse needs.
- Time constraints due to curriculum demands.
- Emotional fatigue and burnout.
- Preconceived notions or biases about certain student groups.

These challenges often lead to under-identification or misidentification of student needs, affecting the quality of support provided. Teachers who receive consistent professional development and work in supportive environments are better equipped to overcome these barriers.

4. Implications

(i) For Teacher Training

The findings underscore the urgent need to strengthen teacher training programs with a focus on inclusive education. Pre-service and in-service training should go beyond theoretical understanding and equip educators with practical tools to identify and support students with differential needs. Modules on differentiated instruction, classroom observation techniques, and inclusive assessment strategies should be integrated into teacher education curricula. Moreover, experiential learning through internships, simulations, and peer collaboration can enhance teachers' confidence and competence in managing diverse classrooms.

(ii) Need for Professional Development

Continuous professional development is essential for keeping teachers updated with evolving pedagogical approaches and inclusive practices. Workshops, refresher courses, and mentoring programs



should be regularly organized to help teachers refine their skills in identifying and responding to student diversity. Professional learning communities within schools can also foster peer support and shared problem-solving. Importantly, training should be context-sensitive, addressing the specific challenges teachers face in their local environments.

(iii) For Policy Makers

Policy makers play a critical role in shaping the conditions under which inclusive education is implemented. The study highlights the need for policies that prioritize inclusive practices and allocate adequate resources to support them. This includes funding for special educators, resource rooms, assistive technologies, and smaller class sizes. Clear guidelines for identification and intervention should be developed and disseminated across schools. Additionally, policies must ensure that teacher training institutions incorporate inclusive education as a core component of their programs.

(iv) Importance of Supportive Policies and Resources

Supportive policies must be backed by tangible resources and infrastructure. Without access to diagnostic tools, professional support, and inclusive learning materials, teachers may struggle to implement what policies advocate. Therefore, governments and educational boards should invest in building inclusive ecosystems within schools where teachers are empowered, students are supported, and diversity is celebrated. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should also be established to assess the effectiveness of inclusive practices and make necessary adjustments.

(v) For Future Research

This study opens several avenues for future research. One key area is the exploration of how cultural and socio-economic factors influence teacher perceptions and identification practices. Longitudinal studies could examine how teacher attitudes evolve over time with exposure to inclusive environments. Additionally, comparative studies across regions or school types (e.g., urban vs. rural, public vs. private) can provide deeper insights into contextual challenges and successes. Research into the effectiveness of specific training models or intervention strategies would also be valuable in informing policy and practice.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the multifaceted role of teachers in identifying and responding to the differential needs of students within inclusive classroom settings. Through a review of national and international



literature, several key insights have emerged. Teachers are central to the success of inclusive education, and their perceptions, attitudes, and practices significantly influence how effectively student diversity is recognized and addressed. While many educators demonstrate a commitment to inclusive values, their ability to implement effective identification strategies is often constrained by systemic challenges such as limited training, inadequate resources, and institutional barriers. The findings reaffirm the critical role teachers play not only as facilitators of learning but also as observers, assessors, and advocates for student needs. Their daily interactions with students position them uniquely to detect subtle indicators of learning difficulties, emotional challenges, and other diverse needs. However, to fulfil this role effectively, teachers require ongoing support through professional development, collaborative networks, and access to inclusive tools and frameworks. Improving the identification of differential needs in classrooms demands a comprehensive approach. Teacher education programs must be restructured to include practical, hands-on training in inclusive pedagogy. Educational policies should prioritize resource allocation and institutional support to create environments where teachers can thrive. Furthermore, future research should continue to explore innovative strategies and contextual factors that influence teacher effectiveness in diverse learning environments. In conclusion, empowering teachers with the knowledge, tools, and support to identify and respond to student diversity is not just a pedagogical necessity but it is a moral imperative. Inclusive education can only be realized when teachers are equipped to see, understand, and nurture the unique potential of every learner.

References

- Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). Teachers' attitudes towards integration/inclusion: A review of the literature. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17(2), 129–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250210129056>
- De Boer, A., Pijl, S. J., & Minnaert, A. (2011). Regular primary schoolteachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(3), 331–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903030089>
- Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096>
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.



- Kupers, E., van Dijk, M., & van Vugt, F. (2023). Differentiation in secondary vocational education: Teachers' intentions and classroom practices. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 121, 103998. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.103998>
- Loreman, T., Deppeler, J., & Harvey, D. (2007). *Inclusive education: A practical guide to supporting diversity in the classroom*. Routledge.
- Mitchell, D. (2015). *What really works in special and inclusive education: Using evidence-based teaching strategies*. Routledge.
- Onyishi, I. E., & Sefotho, M. M. (2020). Teachers' use of differentiated instruction in Nigerian primary schools: Implications for inclusive education. *African Journal of Disability*, 9, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v9i0.705>
- Subban, P. (2006). Differentiated instruction: A research basis. *International Education Journal*, 7(7), 935–947.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Bhatnagar, N., & Das, A. (2014). Attitudes of secondary school teachers towards inclusive education in Delhi, India. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 14(4), 255–263. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12016>
- Chakraborty, S., & Banerjee, S. (2018). Role of school leadership in promoting inclusive education: A study in West Bengal. *Indian Journal of Educational Administration*, 10(1), 45–58.
- Joshi, R., & Thomas, M. (2021). Teachers' perceptions of resource rooms and their role in inclusive education: A study in Maharashtra. *Journal of Indian Education*, 47(2), 23–35.
- Kaur, H. (2018). Continuous professional development and inclusive practices: A study of Punjab school teachers. *Educational Quest*, 9(3), 215–222.
- Kumar, A., & Saikia, L. (2020). Teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in Assam: A study of challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Educational Research and Technology*, 11(1), 1–6.



- Mehta, P., & Kumar, R. (2016). Understanding differential needs beyond disabilities: A study of Delhi NCR schools. *Indian Journal of Special Education*, 6(2), 89–97.
- Narayana, S., & Reddy, G. L. (2017). Identification of learning difficulties by teachers: A study in Andhra Pradesh. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 11(1), 34–42.
- Rao, S. (2019). Differentiated instruction in urban Indian schools: A comparative study. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 10(12), 56–63.
- Saxena, M. (2022). Evaluating inclusive education modules in teacher training programs: A study in Uttar Pradesh. *Indian Journal of Teacher Education*, 14(1), 77–85.
- Sharma, U., & Das, A. (2015). Inclusive education in India: Teachers' perspectives and practices. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(3), 275–290.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2015.1030381>