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## Teachers' Lived Experiences of Inclusive Practices with Autistic Learners in Mainstream Classrooms

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines teachers' lived experiences of implementing inclusive practices for autistic learners in mainstream classrooms through a qualitative phenomenological lens. It focuses on how teachers interpret and respond to the complexities of inclusion in everyday teaching-learning contexts. Data were generated through in-depth conversations, reflective narratives, and classroom engagement. The findings reveal that inclusion is not a fixed or standardized model but an evolving practice shaped by teachers' experiential knowledge, emotional engagement, and adaptive pedagogical strategies. Teachers often depend on informal and experience-based approaches due to limited formal training in autism and inclusive education. This highlights a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. The study underscores the importance of teacher agency, contextual sensitivity, and reflective practice in fostering meaningful inclusion. It further suggests that inclusive readiness involves the integration of conceptual understanding, emotional preparedness, and flexible pedagogy within diverse classroom settings (Sharma & Deppeler, 2019; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; UNESCO, 2023; Das et al., 2021).



## Introduction

Inclusive education has become a key focus in global educational discourse, emphasizing equity, participation, and access for all learners within mainstream educational settings. Rooted in principles of social justice and human rights, inclusive education aims to accommodate diverse learning needs, including those of autistic learners, within regular classrooms. Autism presents distinct challenges related to communication, social interaction, and behavioral patterns, requiring adaptive and responsive pedagogical approaches.

While international frameworks strongly advocate inclusive practices, there remains a noticeable gap between policy and classroom implementation. In many cases, inclusion is limited to physical placement rather than meaningful participation in learning processes. Teachers play a critical role in bridging this gap, acting as mediators between policy ideals and classroom realities. Their beliefs, attitudes, and practices significantly influence how inclusion is enacted on a daily basis (UNESCO, 2023; Ainscow, 2020; Sharma & Deppeler, 2019).

However, research suggests that many teachers lack formal training in special and inclusive education, particularly in understanding autism. As a result, their knowledge often develops through direct classroom experience, observation, and interaction with learners. This experiential learning shapes their interpretation of inclusion and informs their teaching practices (Das et al., 2021; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Therefore, exploring teachers' lived experiences becomes essential for understanding how inclusion is practically realized in mainstream classrooms.

## Rationale of the Study

Despite increasing emphasis on inclusive education policies at national and international levels, there exists a significant disconnect between policy expectations and classroom realities. Much of the existing research has focused on policy analysis, institutional readiness, or student outcomes, with relatively limited attention to the everyday experiences of teachers who are central to the implementation of inclusive practices.

Teachers often encounter multiple challenges, including large class sizes, diverse learner needs, limited resources, and insufficient professional support. In the context of autism, these challenges become more complex due to the need for individualized attention and specialized strategies. In the absence of adequate training, teachers frequently rely on trial-and-error methods and experiential knowledge to manage inclusive classrooms (Das et al., 2021; Florian, 2014; Ainscow, 2020).



Furthermore, inclusion is not merely a technical process but also an emotional and relational one. Teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and emotional engagement influence how they respond to diversity in the classroom. Understanding these dimensions requires a qualitative exploration of lived experiences rather than purely quantitative assessment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; van Manen, 2016). Hence, this study is undertaken to provide deeper insights into how teachers interpret and negotiate inclusion in real-life classroom contexts.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways. First, it contributes to the growing body of qualitative research on inclusive education by foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, which are often underrepresented in mainstream research. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study provides deeper insights into the subjective meanings and interpretations that teachers attach to inclusion and autism.

Second, the study highlights the importance of teacher agency in shaping inclusive practices. Rather than viewing teachers as passive implementers of policy, it recognizes them as active agents who adapt, modify, and create strategies based on classroom realities. This perspective aligns with contemporary views on inclusive pedagogy, which emphasize flexibility, responsiveness, and context-sensitive approaches (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Ainscow, 2020).

Third, the findings have practical implications for teacher education and professional development. They underscore the need for continuous training programs that integrate both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for inclusive education, particularly in relation to autism. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of emotional support and well-being for teachers engaged in inclusive practices (Sharma & Deppeler, 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

Finally, for policymakers and educational planners, the study suggests that inclusive education should not be implemented as a uniform model but should be adapted to local contexts and classroom realities. A context-sensitive approach that values teacher experiences and insights can lead to more meaningful and sustainable inclusion (Majumdar, 2022; Ainscow, 2020).

### Objectives of the Study

1. To explore teachers' understanding of autism within mainstream classroom contexts.
2. To examine the challenges faced by teachers in implementing inclusive practices for autistic learners.



3. To identify the teaching strategies and classroom practices adopted to support autistic learners.
4. To understand the emotional and professional experiences of teachers engaged in inclusive education.
5. To develop a context-based understanding of inclusive practices grounded in teachers’ lived experiences.

**Research Questions**

1. How do teachers interpret and understand autism in mainstream classroom settings?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter while practicing inclusion for autistic learners?
3. What teaching strategies and classroom practices are used to support autistic learners?
4. How do teachers experience inclusion at emotional and professional levels?
5. How can inclusive practices be understood through teachers’ lived experiences in classroom contexts?

**Literature Review Table with Research Gap**

<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Focus of Study</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Research Gap Identified</b>
<b>Avramidis &amp; Norwich (2002)</b>	Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education	Teachers’ attitudes significantly influence inclusion; lack of training affects confidence	Limited focus on lived classroom experiences, especially related to autism
<b>Sharma &amp; Duppeler (2019)</b>	Teacher preparedness for inclusive education	Professional training improves teacher efficacy in inclusive settings	Does not explore how teachers adapt practices in real classroom situations
<b>Florian &amp; Black-Hawkins (2011)</b>	Inclusive pedagogy framework	Emphasizes inclusive teaching strategies for all learners	Lacks empirical qualitative evidence on teachers’ lived experiences
<b>Ainscow (2020)</b>	Development of	Inclusion requires systemic	Focuses more on policy and



	inclusive school systems	reform and collaborative practices	systems rather than individual teacher experiences
<b>Das et al. (2021)</b>	Challenges in inclusive classrooms in India	Teachers face constraints like lack of resources and training	Limited exploration of autism-specific classroom experiences
<b>Majumdar (2022)</b>	Inclusive practices in Indian education	Highlights importance of contextual and localized approaches	Insufficient qualitative insight into teachers' experiential learning
<b>UNESCO (2023)</b>	Global education monitoring on inclusion	Strong advocacy for inclusive education policies worldwide	Gap between policy recommendations and classroom-level implementation
<b>Florian (2014)</b>	Teacher education for inclusion	Teacher preparation is key to effective inclusive practice	Does not deeply explore emotional and experiential dimensions of teaching
<b>Clandinin &amp; Connelly (2000)</b>	Narrative inquiry in education	Emphasizes importance of lived experiences in educational research	Not specifically focused on inclusion or autism in classrooms
<b>van Manen (2016)</b>	Phenomenological research methods	Provides framework for studying lived experiences	Methodological focus; lacks application to inclusive education contexts

### Research Methodology

The present study adopts a **qualitative research approach** grounded in a **phenomenological perspective** to explore teachers' lived experiences of inclusive practices with autistic learners in mainstream classrooms. This approach is considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective interpretations, meanings, and everyday realities associated with inclusion (van Manen, 2016; Creswell, 2014). The study focuses on teachers who are actively engaged in inclusive classroom settings, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and richness of experience.



Data were generated through **in-depth semi-structured conversations**, allowing participants to freely express their experiences, perceptions, and challenges. In addition, **reflective narratives** provided by teachers and **informal classroom observations** were used to gain deeper insights into actual classroom practices. These multiple sources of data helped in developing a comprehensive understanding of inclusive teaching in context.

The collected data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, involving careful reading and re-reading of narratives, identification of significant statements, and clustering of recurring patterns into meaningful themes. This process allowed for the interpretation of both explicit descriptions and underlying meanings within teachers' experiences (**Braun & Clarke, 2006**). Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' perspectives.

Overall, the methodology emphasizes a **context-sensitive and experience-based exploration**, aiming to capture the complexity of inclusive practices as they are lived and enacted by teachers in real classroom environments.

## **Analysis and Interpretation**

### **(Objective-wise with Research Questions)**

#### **Objective 1:**

**To explore teachers' understanding of autism within mainstream classroom contexts.**

#### **Research Question 1:**

How do teachers interpret and understand autism in mainstream classroom settings?

#### **Analysis:**

The analysis of teacher narratives indicates that understanding of autism is largely **experience-driven and evolving**. Teachers often identify autism through observable classroom behaviors such as communication difficulties, repetitive actions, and challenges in social interaction. However, many participants expressed uncertainty in distinguishing autism from other learning difficulties due to limited formal training. Their understanding is shaped through continuous interaction with learners rather than theoretical knowledge.



**Interpretation:**

This suggests that teachers construct their understanding of autism through **situated classroom experiences**, making their knowledge practical but sometimes fragmented. The findings highlight the need for structured professional development to strengthen conceptual clarity while valuing experiential insights (Sharma & Deppeler, 2019; Das et al., 2021).

**Objective 2:**

**To examine the challenges faced by teachers in implementing inclusive practices for autistic learners.**

**Research Question 2:**

What challenges do teachers encounter while practicing inclusion for autistic learners?

**Analysis:**

Teachers reported multiple challenges, including managing diverse learners within a single classroom, time constraints, lack of specialized training, and limited institutional support. Classroom size and rigid curriculum demands further complicated inclusive practices. Teachers often felt pressured to balance the needs of autistic learners with those of the entire class.

**Interpretation:**

Inclusion is practiced within **structural and institutional constraints**, requiring constant negotiation by teachers. The findings reveal a gap between inclusive policy ideals and classroom realities, emphasizing the need for systemic support and resource allocation (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

**Objective 3:**

**To identify the teaching strategies and classroom practices adopted to support autistic learners.**

**Research Question 3:**

What teaching strategies and classroom practices are used to support autistic learners?

**Analysis:**

Teachers described adopting **flexible and adaptive strategies**, such as simplifying instructions, using visual aids, allowing alternative communication methods, and encouraging peer support. These practices were not formally structured but developed gradually through observation, trial-and-error, and reflection.



Teachers also emphasized the importance of creating a supportive and predictable classroom environment.

**Interpretation:**

Inclusive pedagogy emerges as a **dynamic and context-responsive process**, shaped by teacher creativity and responsiveness rather than fixed models. This reflects the principles of inclusive pedagogy that emphasize adaptability and learner-centered approaches (**Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian, 2014**).

**Objective 4:**

**To understand the emotional and professional experiences of teachers engaged in inclusive education.**

**Research Question 4:**

How do teachers experience inclusion at emotional and professional levels?

**Analysis:**

Teachers' experiences reflected a combination of emotional engagement, professional responsibility, and occasional stress. While initial interactions with autistic learners were often marked by uncertainty, teachers gradually developed empathy, patience, and a sense of commitment. However, the process was also emotionally demanding, requiring sustained attention and care.

**Interpretation:**

Inclusion involves significant **emotional labour**, making teacher well-being a critical aspect of inclusive education. Emotional engagement enhances teacher effectiveness but also necessitates institutional recognition and support (**Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; van Manen, 2016**).

**Objective 5:**

**To develop a context-based understanding of inclusive practices grounded in teachers' lived experiences.**

**Research Question 5:**

How can inclusive practices be understood through teachers' lived experiences in classroom contexts?



**Analysis:**

The overall findings suggest that inclusive practices are shaped by an interplay of teachers’ understanding, emotional engagement, and pedagogical adaptation. Teachers do not follow a fixed model of inclusion; instead, they continuously modify their approaches based on classroom realities and student needs.

**Interpretation:**

Inclusive education can be conceptualized as a **multi-dimensional and context-sensitive process**, involving:

- **Conceptual Readiness** (understanding of autism and diversity)
- **Emotional Readiness** (empathy and patience)
- **Pedagogical Readiness** (flexible teaching strategies)

Effective inclusion emerges when these dimensions interact dynamically within classroom contexts. This reinforces the idea that teacher agency is central to meaningful inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Majumdar, 2022).

**Findings of the Study**

Objective	Research Question	Major Theme	Key Findings
<b>Objective 1:</b> To explore teachers’ understanding of autism	How do teachers interpret and understand autism?	Experience-Based Understanding	Teachers’ understanding of autism is largely shaped through classroom interaction rather than formal training; identification is based on observable behaviors such as communication difficulties and repetitive actions.
<b>Objective 2:</b> To examine challenges in inclusive classrooms	What challenges do teachers encounter?	Inclusion within Constraints	Teachers face challenges like large class size, lack of training, limited resources, and difficulty balancing diverse learner needs; inclusion is often constrained by institutional limitations.
<b>Objective 3:</b> To	What strategies are	Adaptive and	Teachers use simplified instructions,



identify teaching strategies and practices	used to support autistic learners?	Flexible Pedagogy	visual aids, peer support, and alternative communication methods; strategies evolve through experience rather than structured planning.
<b>Objective 4:</b> To understand emotional and professional experiences	How do teachers experience inclusion emotionally and professionally?	Emotional Engagement and Responsibility	Teachers develop empathy and patience over time, but also experience stress and emotional demands; inclusion involves significant emotional labour.
<b>Objective 5:</b> To develop a context-based understanding of inclusion	How can inclusion be understood through lived experiences?	Inclusive Readiness as Multi-Dimensional	Inclusion is shaped by three dimensions—conceptual understanding, emotional readiness, and pedagogical flexibility; teacher agency plays a central role.

### Conclusion

The present study highlights that inclusive education for autistic learners in mainstream classrooms is not merely a policy directive but a dynamic and evolving practice shaped by teachers' lived experiences. Teachers play a central role in interpreting and implementing inclusion, often relying on experiential knowledge rather than formal training. Their understanding of autism develops through continuous classroom interaction, making inclusion a context-specific and adaptive process.

The findings reveal that while teachers demonstrate commitment and creativity in supporting autistic learners, they face multiple challenges, including limited resources, lack of specialized training, and institutional constraints. Despite these challenges, teachers adopt flexible and responsive pedagogical strategies, emphasizing the importance of adaptability in inclusive teaching.

Importantly, the study underscores the emotional dimension of inclusion, where teachers engage with empathy, patience, and responsibility, but also experience emotional strain. This highlights the need to recognize teacher well-being as a critical component of inclusive education.

Overall, the study concludes that effective inclusion requires a **multi-dimensional approach**, integrating conceptual understanding, emotional readiness, and pedagogical flexibility. It also emphasizes the importance of teacher agency and context-sensitive practices in bridging the gap between inclusive



policies and classroom realities. Strengthening inclusive education, therefore, necessitates continuous professional development, supportive institutional frameworks, and policies that acknowledge the complexities of classroom practice.

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