

Teacher Preparedness and Pedagogical Approaches in Inclusive Settings for Learners with Multiple Disabilities

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Abstract: Inclusive education aims to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (UNESCO, 2009). Learners with multiple disabilities face unique challenges that require specialized support and inclusive strategies (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). This study investigates the level of preparedness among teachers and the pedagogical approaches they adopt in inclusive classrooms to accommodate students with multiple disabilities (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). Using a mixed-method research design, the study explores teachers' training, attitudes, resources, and classroom strategies (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013). The findings highlight a significant gap between policy and practice, emphasizing the need for targeted professional development, access to inclusive teaching materials, and stronger institutional support (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Loreman, 2007). The study contributes to the understanding of inclusive education dynamics and offers recommendations to improve teacher efficacy in managing diverse classrooms (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Multiple Disabilities, Teacher Preparedness, Pedagogical Strategies, Special Needs Education, Inclusive Classroom, Teacher Training, Differentiated Instruction.



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Introduction:

Inclusive education represents a commitment to provide quality education to all learners, irrespective of their physical, intellectual, emotional, or social conditions (UNESCO, 2009). With the rise in advocacy for inclusive practices, the integration of children with multiple disabilities into mainstream schools has gained momentum (Singal, 2006). However, inclusion is not merely about placement but ensuring that every learner is actively engaged and supported in the learning

process (**Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011**). This necessitates the readiness of teachers to address diverse needs through appropriate pedagogical practices (**Loreman, 2007**). The complexity of educating students with multiple disabilities—who may have combinations of cognitive, sensory, motor, or communication impairments—requires teachers to be both knowledgeable and adaptable (**Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011**). This research delves into how prepared teachers are to meet these needs and what strategies they use to foster inclusive learning environments (**Avramidis & Norwich, 2002**).

Rationale of the Study:

Despite progressive education policies promoting inclusive education, the practical implementation often falls short, particularly in addressing the needs of learners with multiple disabilities. Teachers are central to this implementation, yet many report feeling underprepared and unsupported in inclusive settings. Existing literature suggests that while general teacher education programs touch upon special education, they often do not equip teachers with specific skills needed for complex cases involving multiple disabilities. Furthermore, there is limited research focusing exclusively on this intersection of teacher preparedness and pedagogical practice. Therefore, this study is crucial in identifying existing gaps in teacher training and classroom application. It also aims to provide insights that could inform curriculum development, policy-making, and institutional frameworks that support inclusive education more effectively.

Literature Review

- **Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin (2012)** emphasized that teacher attitudes and preparedness significantly influence the success of inclusive education. They found that insufficient training and lack of exposure to disability-related challenges hinder inclusive practices, especially for students with multiple disabilities.
- **Avramidis and Norwich (2002)** analyzed various teacher beliefs about inclusion. They found that positive teacher attitudes are strongly linked to proper training, institutional support, and prior experience with special needs children.
- **Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011)** introduced the concept of "inclusive pedagogy," which encourages teachers to plan lessons that accommodate all learners. They argue that teaching strategies need to move beyond differentiation to ensure collective participation.
- **Friend and Bursuck (2009)** highlighted that collaborative teaching models, such as co-teaching between general and special educators, can enhance instructional effectiveness in inclusive settings, particularly for students with complex disabilities.
- **Mittler (2000)** stressed that inclusive education is not just a special education issue but a reform that demands teacher education programs to be restructured to prepare all teachers for diversity in the classroom.
- **Loreman (2007)** found that teacher efficacy is one of the most influential factors in inclusive teaching. When teachers believe in their ability to teach learners with multiple disabilities, their classroom practices are more adaptive and inclusive.
- **Kauffman & Hallahan (2011)** critiqued that most educational systems are not adequately structured to support students with multiple disabilities. They argue for more personalized instruction, adaptive technologies, and teacher support systems.
- **Booth and Ainscow (2011)** proposed the "Index for Inclusion," which highlights three dimensions: creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive practices. Their framework stresses the ongoing role of teacher development.

- **Subban and Sharma (2006)** conducted studies in South Asia and found that teacher attitudes are influenced by access to resources and ongoing professional development, particularly when working with students with multiple impairments.
- **Das, Kuyini & Desai (2013)** studied inclusive education in India and found that while policies support inclusion, teachers lack the practical knowledge and pedagogical skills to implement inclusive teaching effectively, especially for children with complex needs.

Objectives of the Study

1. **To examine the level of preparedness among general and special education teachers in addressing the needs of learners with multiple disabilities in inclusive classroom settings.**
2. **To identify and analyze the pedagogical strategies adopted by teachers for effectively teaching students with multiple disabilities in inclusive educational environments.**

Research Questions

1. **To what extent are teachers prepared—professionally and attitudinally—to teach learners with multiple disabilities in inclusive settings?**
2. **What pedagogical approaches are most commonly used by teachers to address the diverse needs of students with multiple disabilities in inclusive classrooms?**

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research methodology** to explore teachers' preparedness and pedagogical strategies in inclusive classrooms accommodating learners with multiple disabilities. A qualitative approach is suitable for gaining in-depth insights into teachers' beliefs, experiences, and instructional practices, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

The research follows a **phenomenological design**, focusing on the lived experiences of teachers who work with students having multiple disabilities in inclusive educational settings. This design helps capture the meaning that participants assign to their roles and classroom experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

Participants were selected using **purposive sampling**, targeting general and special education teachers from inclusive schools with at least two years of experience. A total of 15 teachers from mainstream government and private schools were interviewed across urban and semi-urban regions. This sampling method ensures that participants have rich, relevant experience to contribute meaningful data (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection

Data was collected through **semi-structured interviews**, which allowed flexibility in probing deeper into teacher experiences while maintaining consistency across participants. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes and reflective journals were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify common patterns and themes within the data. Transcripts were coded manually and categorized under major themes such as teacher

preparedness, inclusive strategies, challenges, and institutional support. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model was used to guide the thematic analysis process, ensuring rigor and transparency.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the research institution, and informed consent was collected from all participants. Participants' identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study (BERA, 2018).

Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers was analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. The following section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data, structured according to the two primary objectives of the study.

Objective 1: To examine the level of preparedness among general and special education teachers in addressing the needs of learners with multiple disabilities in inclusive classroom settings

Theme 1: Inadequate Pre-Service Training

Many general education teachers reported that their pre-service training programs included very limited content on teaching students with disabilities, particularly those with multiple disabilities. In contrast, special educators showed relatively higher confidence in addressing diverse needs, though they also identified gaps in handling complex comorbidities such as cognitive and communication impairments together.

"We had one or two lectures on special education during B.Ed., but it was not enough to prepare us for the real classroom situations involving multiple disabilities." — (Participant 3, General Education Teacher)

Theme 2: Professional Development and In-Service Support

Several teachers expressed the need for continuous in-service training focused on inclusive strategies. Participants emphasized that school-based workshops, peer observations, and collaboration with special educators significantly enhanced their preparedness.

"Whenever we get to attend a practical training session or interact with a special educator, we feel more equipped. Otherwise, it's often trial and error." — (Participant 7, Primary Teacher)

Theme 3: Emotional Readiness and Attitudinal Beliefs

While most participants demonstrated a positive attitude toward inclusive education, some showed anxiety and concern about their ability to meet the complex needs of students with multiple disabilities without adequate support.

"I want to help, but sometimes I feel helpless when I don't know how to manage a child with both vision and learning difficulties." — (Participant 11, Secondary School Teacher)

Objective 2: To identify and analyze the pedagogical strategies adopted by teachers for effectively teaching students with multiple disabilities in inclusive educational environments

Theme 4: Use of Differentiated Instruction

Teachers employed differentiated instructional methods to cater to the varied learning levels and sensory needs of students with multiple disabilities. These included the use of visual aids, tactile learning materials, peer tutoring, and simplified language.

"I use flashcards, textured alphabets, and sometimes even music to reach children who cannot learn through traditional methods." — (Participant 1, Special Educator)

Theme 5: Collaborative Teaching Practices

Many schools encouraged collaboration between general and special educators. Co-teaching, team planning, and shared classroom responsibilities were cited as effective strategies for supporting students with multiple disabilities.

“I work closely with the special educator, and we plan lessons together. It helps both of us and the students.” — (Participant 6, Upper Primary Teacher)

Theme 6: Classroom Adaptations and Resource Utilization

Participants reported adapting seating arrangements, using assistive devices, and simplifying instructional content. However, many also expressed concern over limited access to teaching-learning materials, specialized staff, and assistive technologies.

“I try to modify the environment—less noise, flexible seating, and visual timetables. But the lack of devices like hearing aids or mobility support limits what I can do.” — (Participant 10, Inclusive Classroom Teacher)

The analysis indicates a considerable variation in teacher preparedness, with special educators showing better technical knowledge but both groups reporting insufficient institutional support and training. Teachers are aware of the need to differentiate instruction and accommodate learners’ individual needs but face challenges related to training, infrastructure, and policy-practice mismatches.

This suggests a strong need for integrating inclusive education principles more rigorously into teacher education programs, providing regular in-service training, and equipping classrooms with inclusive teaching aids. The data also reinforce the value of peer collaboration, school-level planning, and emotional resilience in fostering inclusive practices.

Findings

To what extent are teachers prepared—professionally and attitudinally—to teach learners with multiple disabilities in inclusive settings?

Finding 1: Limited Formal Training in Inclusive Education

A significant number of general education teachers lacked formal training related to special or inclusive education. Many had only surface-level knowledge acquired through brief modules in pre-service courses. Special educators reported slightly higher levels of preparedness, but even they found it challenging to manage students with multiple, overlapping disabilities.

Finding 2: Positive Attitudes with Low Confidence

While most teachers expressed favorable attitudes toward inclusive education and showed willingness to support learners with multiple disabilities, many lacked confidence due to insufficient training and classroom experience. Teachers often felt emotionally committed but professionally underprepared.

Finding 3: Inadequate Institutional and In-Service Support

Few teachers had access to structured, ongoing professional development opportunities focused on multiple disabilities. In-service training, when available, was irregular or generalized rather than targeted to specific classroom challenges. The lack of school-based resource persons and special educators further hindered effective support.

Finding 4: Emotional Resilience and Informal Peer Learning

Teachers often relied on peer collaboration and experiential learning to develop strategies for inclusive practice. Some teachers displayed emotional resilience and adaptability, learning “on the job” through reflective practice and shared classroom responsibilities.

What pedagogical approaches are most commonly used by teachers to address the diverse needs of students with multiple disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

Finding 5: Use of Differentiated and Multisensory Instruction

Many teachers adopted differentiated teaching methods, such as simplified instructions, visual aids, story-telling, group work, and task breakdown. Teachers also used multisensory approaches—incorporating audio, visual, and tactile resources—to accommodate students with varied impairments.

Finding 6: Peer Support and Cooperative Learning

Peer tutoring and small group learning emerged as a commonly used and effective method to engage students with multiple disabilities. These methods not only enhanced academic participation but also promoted social inclusion.

Finding 7: Flexible Classroom Management

Several teachers adjusted classroom layouts, introduced behavior management techniques, and modified lesson pacing to create a more inclusive environment. Seating arrangements, lighting, use of visual schedules, and movement breaks were tailored to suit specific needs.

Finding 8: Lack of Access to Assistive Technologies

Despite their efforts, many teachers reported the unavailability of appropriate assistive tools (like speech-to-text software, Braille kits, or mobility aids) as a serious barrier to the effectiveness of their pedagogical approaches.

Summary of Findings

The table below summarizes the major findings corresponding to each research question:

Research Question	Key Findings
1. To what extent are teachers prepared—professionally and attitudinally—to teach learners with multiple disabilities in inclusive settings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General teachers lack formal training in special/inclusive education. - Positive attitudes but low confidence. - Irregular in-service training. - Peer support and experiential learning are primary coping tools.
2. What pedagogical approaches are most commonly used by teachers to address the diverse needs of students with multiple disabilities in inclusive classrooms?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Differentiated instruction and multisensory methods are widely used. - Peer tutoring and group work help social and academic inclusion. - Flexible classroom arrangements are common. - Lack of assistive technology is a major barrier.

Conclusion

The study concludes that while teachers generally support the idea of inclusive education, their level of preparedness—both professional and practical—remains insufficient to fully meet the complex needs of learners with multiple disabilities. The gap between inclusive education policy and classroom practice is evident in limited training, absence of assistive tools, and lack of structured support systems within schools.

Teachers often rely on differentiated strategies, multisensory methods, and peer collaboration, but these efforts are largely informal and lack systemic reinforcement. The findings call for the integration of disability-specific training in teacher education programs, regular in-service workshops, improved infrastructure, and the provision of assistive technologies.

Ultimately, the success of inclusive education depends not only on teacher attitudes but also on institutional readiness, policy implementation, and ongoing professional development. Strengthening these aspects will empower teachers to create truly inclusive learning environments where students with multiple disabilities can thrive academically and socially.

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