

# UNDERSTANDING TEACHER DECISION-MAKING IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BELIEFS, CONSTRAINTS, AND PEDAGOGICAL ADAPTATION

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## Abstract

Inclusive education policies increasingly emphasize the role of teachers as central agents in creating equitable learning environments. However, the ways in which teachers interpret and enact inclusion in everyday classroom practice remain complex and context-dependent. This study explores teacher decision-making in inclusive classrooms through a qualitative analysis of reflective teaching narratives and semi-structured interviews. Focusing on experienced secondary school teachers, the paper examines how beliefs about learning, institutional constraints, and classroom realities shape pedagogical choices. The findings reveal that inclusive practice is not guided by fixed strategies but emerges through continuous negotiation between ideals and practical limitations. The study contributes to inclusive education research by highlighting the situated and interpretive nature of teaching in diverse classrooms.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, teacher cognition, classroom practice, qualitative research, pedagogy.

## Introduction

### 1. Teaching Inclusion as Everyday Judgment

Inclusive education is often described in terms of principles, policies, and frameworks. Yet for teachers, inclusion is rarely experienced as an abstract concept. It is encountered in moments of decision: whether to slow down a lesson,

how to respond to a struggling student, or how to maintain engagement across a diverse group.

These decisions are rarely straightforward. Teachers operate within conditions that require them to balance competing demands, including curriculum requirements, time constraints, and the diverse needs of students. As a result, inclusive teaching is less about applying predefined strategies and more about making informed judgments in context.

This paper begins from the premise that understanding inclusion requires attention to how teachers think, interpret, and act in real classroom situations.

## **2. Conceptualizing Teacher Cognition in Inclusive Education**

Teacher cognition refers to the beliefs, knowledge, and thought processes that inform teaching practice. In inclusive settings, these cognitive dimensions become particularly significant because teachers must interpret diversity not as a problem to be managed but as a normal condition of learning.

Existing research suggests that teachers' beliefs about ability, fairness, and learning shape their approach to inclusion. For example, a teacher who views ability as fixed may be more inclined to group students by perceived competence, whereas a teacher who views learning as developmental may emphasize flexible support and growth.

However, beliefs alone do not determine practice. Teachers must also navigate institutional structures, classroom dynamics, and resource limitations. This creates a situation in which pedagogical decisions are both cognitively informed and contextually constrained.

## **3. Research Context and Methodology**

This study is based on qualitative data collected from secondary school teachers working in inclusive educational settings. Participants were selected based on their experience in teaching diverse classrooms, including students with varying academic abilities, language backgrounds, and learning needs.

Data was generated through semi-structured interviews and reflective teaching accounts. Rather than focusing on what teachers claim to do in general, the study emphasizes how they describe specific classroom situations and the reasoning behind their actions. The analysis adopts an interpretive approach, examining patterns in how teachers make sense of inclusion in practice.

#### **4. Negotiating Inclusion in Practice**

A recurring theme in the data is the tension between pedagogical ideals and classroom realities. Teachers frequently express commitment to inclusive principles, yet they also describe situations in which full inclusion appears difficult to achieve.

For instance, one teacher reflects on the challenge of maintaining lesson pace while ensuring that all students understand the material. Slowing down instruction may support some learners but risks disengaging others. In such situations, teachers do not apply a fixed solution; instead, they make situational adjustments, such as providing brief clarifications, offering additional examples, or revisiting concepts later.

Another teacher describes the difficulty of addressing diverse language needs within a single lesson. While simplified explanations can support language learners, they may reduce the complexity of content for other students. The teacher responds by varying explanation styles and encouraging peer interaction, allowing students to support one another informally.

These examples illustrate that inclusion is not achieved through uniform strategies but through **continuous pedagogical adaptation**.

#### **5. The Role of Constraints**

Teacher decision-making is also shaped by structural constraints. Curriculum requirements, assessment pressures, and limited time often restrict the extent to which teachers can individualize instruction.

Several participants highlight the pressure to complete prescribed content within a fixed timeframe. This creates a dilemma: prioritizing coverage may compromise depth of understanding, while focusing on individual needs may slow overall progress.

Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrate a capacity to adapt. Rather than attempting to overcome limitations entirely, they work within them, making small but meaningful adjustments that support inclusion.

#### **6. Rethinking Inclusive Practice**

The findings suggest that inclusive teaching should not be understood as the implementation of specific techniques. Instead, it is better conceptualized as a form of **situated professional judgment**.

Teachers do not simply apply methods; they interpret situations, weigh options, and respond dynamically. Inclusion, therefore, is not a fixed state but an ongoing process shaped by interaction, context, and reflection.

## **7. Implications for Teacher Development**

If inclusive practice depends on judgment rather than procedure, then teacher education must move beyond training in strategies alone. It should support the development of:

- Reflective thinking
- Sensitivity to learner diversity
- Capacity to adapt instruction in real time

This requires creating opportunities for teachers to engage with real classroom scenarios, reflect on their decisions, and learn from experience.

## **8. Conclusion**

Inclusive education is often framed as a goal to be achieved through policy and planning. However, this study shows that its realization depends on the everyday decisions of teachers. These decisions are shaped by beliefs, constraints, and the complexities of classroom life.

Understanding inclusion, therefore, requires attention not only to what teachers do, but to how they think. By focusing on teacher cognition, this paper highlights the human dimension of inclusive education and the central role of professional judgment in shaping equitable learning environments.

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