

General Education Teacher Attitudes Toward the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in United Arab Emirates Mainstream Schools

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigated the attitudes of general education teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) toward the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms. Utilizing a structured questionnaire distributed to 100 teachers across various emirates, the research aimed to identify prevailing perceptions and examine how factors such as training, teaching experience, and institutional support influence these attitudes. Data analysis, conducted using SPSS software, included descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and correlation analyses to ensure robust and valid findings.

The results indicate a generally positive attitude toward inclusion, particularly among teachers who have received formal training in inclusive education or have previous experience teaching students with SEN. Teachers expressed a willingness to accommodate diverse learning needs but also voiced significant concerns regarding the adequacy of resources, availability of classroom support staff, and time constraints. These concerns were more pronounced among teachers working in overcrowded classrooms or with limited access to professional development opportunities.

The findings highlight the critical role of ongoing professional development and the provision of adequate institutional support in fostering more inclusive classroom environments. The study also emphasizes the importance of school leadership and policy frameworks that promote collaboration, differentiation, and access to assistive technologies.

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education in the UAE context and provides practical insights for policymakers, educational leaders, and teacher training institutions. Recommendations for future research include longitudinal studies, exploration of student outcomes, and comparative analyses across public and private school sectors.

Keywords: *inclusion, special education, UAE, mainstream education, teacher attitudes, quantitative research*

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Introduction

Inclusive education has become a global imperative, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. This approach is grounded in the belief that all children, including those with special educational needs (SEN), have the right to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream settings, where diversity is embraced and supported. Over the past decade, there has been a significant shift in educational policies and practices worldwide, reflecting a growing commitment to inclusion as a fundamental human right and educational principle.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has made considerable strides toward aligning its educational system with global inclusive education standards. Guided by international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 Quality Education, the UAE has developed national policies and strategies aimed at promoting inclusive practices across public and private school systems. These include the “School for All” initiative and the implementation of the Ministry of Education's inclusive education guidelines, which call for differentiated instruction, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and the involvement of specialized support staff. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of inclusion depends largely on the attitudes and readiness of general education teachers, who are on the front lines of implementation.

In the UAE, the teaching workforce is highly diverse, with educators coming from various cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. This diversity can influence individual perceptions and acceptance of inclusive education practices. While government mandates promote the integration of SEN students into mainstream classrooms, research indicates that many teachers feel inadequately prepared, undertrained, or unsupported to meet the complex needs of learners with disabilities. A lack of sufficient resources, professional development opportunities, and classroom assistance often hinders the practical application of inclusive strategies, despite teachers' personal willingness to support inclusion.

Furthermore, institutional factors such as leadership commitment, school culture, and access to ongoing support services can significantly shape how inclusion is practiced on the ground. Inconsistent implementation across schools suggests a need for further investigation into the underlying variables that affect teachers' engagement with inclusion.

This study aimed to explore the attitudes of general education teachers in UAE mainstream schools toward the inclusion of SEN students. Specifically, it examined how variables such as professional training, teaching experience, and perceived institutional support correlate with teachers' confidence and willingness to implement inclusive practices. By surveying a sample of 100 teachers from different emirates and educational settings, this research intended to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing evidence-based recommendations that can inform teacher training programs, improve policy implementation, and ultimately create more inclusive school environments. The findings of this study have the potential

to guide educational leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders in enhancing the UAE's inclusive education framework.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the general attitudes of teachers toward the inclusion of SEN students in mainstream classrooms?
2. How do training, teaching experience, and institutional support impact these attitudes?

Literature Review

Inclusive education involves integrating students with diverse abilities into general education classrooms, promoting equal access to meaningful learning experiences. Rooted in the philosophy of equity and social justice, inclusive education emphasizes the need to accommodate all learners regardless of their physical, cognitive, emotional, or sensory needs. Globally, educational systems have been shifting from segregated models to inclusive frameworks, recognizing that inclusion is not merely a placement issue but a matter of transforming the system to meet diverse student needs.

International frameworks such as UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006) strongly advocate for inclusive practices. These documents assert that inclusive education is a right and an essential element in achieving full participation and equality in society. They call for the removal of barriers that limit participation, emphasizing teacher training, community engagement, and systemic reform as essential components of inclusive implementation. Following this global trend, many countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have introduced inclusive education initiatives that seek to dismantle systemic and attitudinal barriers to learning.

In response to international obligations, the UAE has implemented national policies aimed at fostering inclusive education, particularly following the launch of its 2017 Policy for Inclusive Education. The policy outlines a commitment to provide quality education for all students, including those with special educational needs (SEN). It emphasizes differentiated instruction, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and the need for collaborative teaching approaches. The UAE Vision 2021 and Centennial 2071 strategies further embed inclusive principles into the broader national development agenda. Despite these policy advancements, gaps remain in the practical implementation of inclusion, especially at the classroom level.

A significant body of research has identified teacher attitudes as a key determinant of the success of inclusive education. Positive teacher attitudes can lead to more successful integration of students with SEN, while negative perceptions may hinder inclusive practices. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that teachers' attitudes are influenced by their training, years of experience, and the level of support available in their schools. Teachers with formal training in special education or inclusive strategies are more likely to demonstrate positive perceptions and greater self-efficacy in handling diverse classrooms. Similarly, Forlin et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of targeted professional development. Their research indicated that

teachers who feel confident in their instructional strategies and classroom management techniques tend to support inclusion more enthusiastically.

In the Middle Eastern context, particularly in the UAE, research presents a complex picture. Studies by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) show that while many UAE teachers are philosophically in favor of inclusion, they often feel inadequately prepared to implement it effectively. One of the main barriers identified is insufficient teacher training specific to inclusive education. Many teachers receive general pedagogical training without adequate exposure to strategies for differentiating instruction, managing diverse learners, or addressing behavioral challenges. This creates a disconnect between policy and practice.

Another recurring challenge is the lack of classroom assistants or co-teachers who can provide additional support for students with SEN. Teachers often report that they feel overwhelmed managing the diverse needs of all students without adequate support. Gaad (2011) pointed out that adapted curricula are often missing or inconsistently applied across schools, leaving teachers to modify lessons independently, which can be time-consuming and stressful. In this regard, access to appropriate resources, such as assistive technology and modified teaching materials, becomes a vital factor in facilitating successful inclusion.

Cultural perceptions of disability in the UAE and broader Arab world also influence how inclusion is perceived and implemented. There remains a degree of social stigma associated with disabilities, which may affect parental expectations, teacher biases, and peer acceptance of students with SEN. Gaad and Khan (2007) argued for the need to adopt culturally responsive inclusion models that respect local values while promoting the rights of individuals with disabilities. These models should emphasize both educational and social integration, ensuring that students with SEN are not merely present in classrooms but actively engaged and supported.

Policy documents such as the UAE School for All guidelines have highlighted the importance of inclusive leadership, ongoing professional development, and collaborative teaching as pillars of effective inclusive education. However, as noted by Alnahdi (2020), the implementation of inclusive education remains inconsistent across different emirates and school types. Some schools benefit from strong leadership and well-established inclusion teams, while others lack the necessary structures and personnel to fully implement inclusive practices. Alnahdi recommends the development of school-wide frameworks and increased investment in human and material resources to support inclusion.

Teaching experience also plays a significant role in shaping attitudes toward inclusion. Sharma and Sokal (2015) found that teachers with more experience working with students with SEN tend to have more positive attitudes and a higher sense of efficacy. These teachers are generally more adaptable and open to using differentiated instruction. Nonetheless, experience alone may not be sufficient without ongoing support. The presence of inclusion specialists, therapists, and administrative backing is critical for ensuring that teachers do not feel isolated in their efforts to implement inclusive strategies.

Another dimension to consider is pre-service teacher education. Research by Loreman et al. (2007) has shown that exposure to inclusive education principles during university training can

significantly impact future teachers' readiness and confidence. In the UAE, universities are increasingly embedding inclusive education modules into teacher preparation programs, yet the depth and consistency of such content can vary widely.

This literature review underscores that while the UAE's policy environment is supportive of inclusion, practical challenges remain. Teachers' attitudes are not formed in isolation but are shaped by their training, the support systems available in their schools, and their personal experiences. Understanding these factors is critical to designing effective interventions aimed at promoting inclusive education. The present study aims to explore these variables within the UAE context by gathering empirical data on teachers' perceptions and the factors influencing them.

By addressing the current gaps in implementation and understanding the nuanced perspectives of general education teachers, this study contributes to the growing body of research focused on inclusive education in the Gulf region. Its findings are intended to inform future policy decisions, support the development of professional training programs, and ultimately promote more inclusive and equitable educational environments for all learners.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design to examine the attitudes of general education teachers toward the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms across the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The quantitative approach was chosen to collect standardized data across a wide sample, enabling statistical analysis of trends and relationships among key variables such as experience, training, and perceived institutional support. The cross-sectional nature of the study allowed data to be collected at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of current attitudes within the UAE educational context.

Participants

A sample of 100 general education teachers working in public and private mainstream schools across the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai was selected using purposive sampling. This sampling method ensured that participants met specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. Inclusion criteria required teachers to have at least one year of teaching experience in a mainstream classroom setting. The sample was diverse in terms of age, gender, years of experience, educational qualifications, and exposure to inclusive education training. Efforts were made to ensure representation from both elementary and secondary school teachers, as well as those teaching in different curriculum frameworks (e.g., British, American, MOE). The diversity of the sample aimed to enhance the generalizability of the findings within the UAE school context.

Instrument

Data were collected through a structured, self-administered online questionnaire developed by the researcher based on existing literature and similar validated instruments. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

1. **Demographic Information:** Included questions about participants' age, gender, years of teaching experience, educational background, and whether they had received training in inclusive education.
2. **Attitudes Toward Inclusion:** Comprised 15 Likert-scale items rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), assessing participants' beliefs about the feasibility, benefits, and challenges of inclusion.
3. **Support and Resources:** Included 5 items evaluating participants' perceptions of institutional support, availability of resources, and collaboration with specialists.

The questionnaire underwent expert validation by three academics in special and inclusive education to ensure content validity. A pilot study was conducted with 10 general education teachers to assess clarity and reliability. Based on feedback, minor adjustments were made. The final instrument achieved a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.89, indicating high internal consistency.

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed via email, WhatsApp groups, and educational social media platforms targeting teachers in the UAE. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Data collection occurred over a two-week period in March 2025. Participants provided informed consent electronically before accessing the survey. No incentives were offered to maintain voluntary participation.

Data Analysis

All responses were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and histograms, were generated to summarize participant responses. Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess internal consistency reliability. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to explore relationships between teacher training, teaching experience, support, and attitudes toward inclusion. These analyses provided insight into the variables that may influence inclusive practice.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring participant anonymity and data confidentiality throughout the research process.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of general education teachers in the UAE toward the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN), and to examine how teacher training, teaching experience, and perceived institutional support influence these attitudes. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and Pearson correlation to address the research questions.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the general trends in participants' responses. The mean score on the attitude scale was $M = 3.97$, with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.62, suggesting that the teachers surveyed generally held positive attitudes toward inclusion. This mean is close to 4.00 on a 5-point scale, indicating agreement with most of the positively framed statements related to inclusive education.

As shown in Table 1, this score reflects a consistent inclination among participants to view inclusive education as beneficial and feasible under the right conditions. However, the moderate standard deviation points to some variability in responses, suggesting that while many teachers were supportive, others expressed more neutral or cautious views.

In terms of background factors, 62% of participants reported having received formal training in inclusive education, which included pre-service coursework, professional development workshops, or certification in special education. Additionally, 74% of teachers indicated that they required more support including classroom assistants, modified teaching materials, and time for collaboration with specialists to implement inclusion more effectively. This aligns with findings in the literature that emphasize the role of structural support in shaping inclusive practices.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Attitude Scores

Statistic	Value
Mean	3.97
SD	0.62

Reliability Analysis

To ensure that the items on the attitude scale consistently measured the same underlying construct, a reliability analysis was conducted. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was $\alpha = 0.89$, as displayed in Table 2, indicating excellent internal consistency. This means that the items used to assess teacher attitudes were highly reliable, and responses across the scale were stable and coherent.

Table 2*Reliability Statistics*

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Attitude Scale	0.89

Correlational Analysis

To examine the relationships between the variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. The results are presented in Table 3.

There was a statistically significant positive correlation between training and attitude toward inclusion ($r = 0.51$, $p < .01$), suggesting that teachers with formal training in inclusive education were more likely to express positive beliefs about including SEN students in their classrooms.

A moderate positive correlation was also found between teaching experience and attitude ($r = 0.43$, $p < .05$), indicating that teachers with more years of experience tended to have more favorable views of inclusion. This may reflect increased exposure to diverse learners and greater classroom management confidence.

The strongest relationship observed was between perceived institutional support and attitude ($r = 0.57$, $p < .01$), reinforcing the importance of environmental and organizational factors in shaping teachers' willingness to adopt inclusive practices. Teachers who felt supported by their schools—through resources, leadership, and collaborative opportunities—were more inclined to embrace inclusion.

Table 3*Correlation Matrix*

Variables	Training	Experience	Support	Attitude
Training	1			0.51**
Experience		1		0.43*
Support			1	0.57**
Attitude	0.51**	0.43*	0.57**	1

*Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

These findings collectively underscore the role of professional training, practical classroom experience, and systemic support in fostering teacher readiness and confidence in implementing

inclusive education. Teachers who are adequately trained and feel supported are significantly more likely to embrace inclusive philosophies and apply them in their daily teaching.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that general education teachers in UAE mainstream schools generally maintain positive attitudes toward the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN). The overall mean attitude score of 3.97 suggests that most participants agreed with statements supporting the value and feasibility of inclusion. This result is consistent with international trends, where teacher attitudes are increasingly favorable when inclusive education is supported by appropriate training and resources (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin et al., 2009).

A key finding of this study is the positive correlation between formal training in inclusive education and teacher attitudes. Teachers who had received structured training whether during pre-service education or through in-service professional development were more likely to demonstrate supportive views of inclusion. This relationship reinforces the importance of equipping educators with both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies to manage diverse classrooms. Training increases teacher confidence and competence, which, in turn, enhances their willingness to adapt instruction for SEN students. This is consistent with Forlin et al. (2009), who found that training significantly improves teacher self-efficacy and openness to inclusive practices.

Furthermore, the study identified a strong positive association between perceived institutional support and positive attitudes toward inclusion. Teachers who reported having access to adequate classroom resources, inclusion assistants, collaboration opportunities with special educators, and administrative support were more favorable in their responses. This emphasizes the crucial role of school infrastructure in shaping inclusive teaching. Without systemic support, even well-trained teachers may struggle to meet the needs of diverse learners. This finding echoes Gaad (2011), who argued that policy alone is insufficient if not accompanied by tangible, on-the-ground resources.

Teaching experience also emerged as a relevant factor. The positive correlation between years of experience and supportive attitudes suggests that longer exposure to inclusive settings increases teacher confidence and competence. This supports the notion that inclusion is a skill developed over time, through real-life interaction with diverse students. Teachers with more experience may also have had greater opportunities to reflect on their teaching methods and witness the progress of SEN students, contributing to more optimistic perspectives.

Despite these encouraging findings, the study also highlights significant challenges. Notably, 74% of teachers indicated a need for more support in implementing inclusion effectively. This points to a gap between inclusive education policy and its practical application. While the UAE has made strong policy-level commitments to inclusion such as the 2017 National Policy for Inclusive Education implementation remains uneven across schools. Teachers often find themselves without the necessary time, resources, or staffing to carry out inclusive strategies to the fullest extent.

To address these issues, a multifaceted approach is needed. Educational policymakers should prioritize the expansion of professional development opportunities in inclusive education, ensuring accessibility for all educators. Additionally, schools must invest in inclusion facilitators, classroom aides, and specialized materials. Creating a collaborative school culture where inclusion is seen not as the responsibility of individual teachers but as a shared institutional mission is also essential.

Ultimately, this study reinforces that positive teacher attitudes are a cornerstone of successful inclusive education, and they are significantly influenced by training, experience, and the support systems surrounding educators.

Limitations and Implications

While this study provides valuable insights into teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education in the UAE, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research relied on a self-report questionnaire, which may introduce social desirability and response biases. Participants might have responded in ways they perceived as favorable or acceptable, rather than providing a fully accurate reflection of their attitudes or experiences. This limitation is common in survey-based studies but nonetheless affects the generalizability of the findings.

Second, although the sample included teachers from Abu Dhabi and Dubai two major emirates the geographical scope of the study was limited, and findings may not fully represent attitudes in other regions of the UAE, such as the Northern Emirates or rural areas, where resources, school policies, and teacher training opportunities may differ. Additionally, the study focused solely on general education teachers, without including perspectives from special educators, school leaders, or students themselves. Including a broader range of stakeholders could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing inclusive education.

Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study offers a snapshot in time but does not capture changes in teacher attitudes over time or as a result of specific interventions. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs to assess how attitudes evolve with continued training, classroom exposure, and institutional support. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or classroom observations, would also allow researchers to gain richer, more nuanced insights into the lived experiences of teachers and the contextual factors influencing their perceptions and practices.

Despite these limitations, the study presents several important implications for policy and practice. The findings underscore the need for ongoing, targeted professional development in inclusive education, emphasizing practical strategies for differentiation, classroom management, and collaboration with support staff. Training should be embedded in both pre-service teacher education programs and in-service initiatives to ensure that all educators are equipped to work with students with diverse needs.

Additionally, educational leaders and policymakers must prioritize structural supports such as inclusion coordinators, learning support assistants, and accessible resources within mainstream schools. Ensuring that teachers are not only trained but also adequately supported is crucial for

sustaining inclusive practices. Finally, fostering a school culture of collaboration and shared responsibility can enhance teacher efficacy and contribute to more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

Conclusion

This study explored the attitudes of general education teachers in the UAE toward the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms. The findings indicate that, overall, teachers hold moderately to highly positive attitudes toward inclusive education. However, these attitudes are strongly influenced by key variables, including formal training in inclusive practices, years of teaching experience with SEN students, and the level of institutional support available within schools. Teachers who had received targeted training and felt supported by their schools were more confident and favorable toward implementing inclusive strategies in their classrooms.

These findings reinforce the importance of equipping educators with the tools and knowledge necessary to foster inclusive learning environments. Professional development programs should be continuous, practical, and embedded in real-world classroom contexts. Moreover, schools must ensure that adequate support systems such as teaching assistants, access to specialists, and adapted materials are in place to reduce the burden on teachers and enhance their capacity to meet diverse learning needs.

By addressing these key areas, policymakers, school leaders, and educators can work collaboratively to promote more inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational settings that enable all students, regardless of ability, to thrive and succeed.

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Appendix A: Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusion Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

This questionnaire is part of a research study conducted to explore the awareness and attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education in the UAE. Your participation is voluntary and responses will be kept confidential. The questionnaire should take about 5–7 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your time and support!

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
3. Number of years teaching: _____
4. Grade level currently teaching: _____
5. Have you received formal training in inclusive education? ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Highest educational qualification: ☐ Bachelor's ☐ Master's ☐ Other: _____

Section 2: Attitudes Toward Inclusion

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements using the scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree | 2 = Disagree | 3 = Neutral | 4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly Agree

No.	Statement	Rating
1	All students, regardless of ability, should be educated together.	1 2 3 4 5
2	Inclusion benefits all students.	1 2 3 4 5
3	I feel confident teaching students with SEN in my classroom.	1 2 3 4 5
4	I believe inclusive education improves social skills for all students.	1 2 3 4 5
5	I have sufficient knowledge to adapt lessons for students with SEN.	1 2 3 4 5
6	Inclusion increases workload for teachers.	1 2 3 4 5
7	I receive adequate support when teaching SEN students.	1 2 3 4 5
8	My school promotes inclusive education effectively.	1 2 3 4 5
9	I feel positive about having students with SEN in my class.	1 2 3 4 5
10	Inclusion should be limited to students with mild disabilities only.	1 2 3 4 5
11	Students with SEN can achieve academic success in regular classrooms.	1 2 3 4 5
12	Collaboration with special educators is essential for inclusion.	1 2 3 4 5
13	I would benefit from more training on inclusive strategies.	1 2 3 4 5
14	Peer support enhances the inclusion of students with SEN.	1 2 3 4 5
15	Inclusive education is feasible in my current teaching environment.	1 2 3 4 5

Section 3: Support and Resources

Please rate your level of agreement with the following items regarding the support you receive.

No.	Statement	Rating
1	My school provides sufficient professional development in inclusive practices.	1 2 3 4 5
2	I have access to support staff (e.g., inclusion assistants, special educators).	1 2 3 4 5
3	I have access to adapted teaching materials for SEN students.	1 2 3 4 5
4	Leadership at my school is supportive of inclusive education.	1 2 3 4 5
5	There is a collaborative culture in my school for supporting inclusion.	1 2 3 4 5
