

Teachers' Self-Efficacy in Teaching Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Primary Schools: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores English teachers' self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs within inclusive primary school classrooms through a phenomenological approach. Inclusive education requires teachers to respond to diverse learning needs; therefore, teachers' beliefs in their instructional capabilities are critical to the successful implementation of inclusive practices. This qualitative study was conducted in an inclusive primary school in Medan, Indonesia, involving ten English teachers who taught both inclusive and regular classes. Data were collected through the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with three selected participants. The questionnaire provided an overview of teachers' perceived self-efficacy levels, while the interviews captured teachers' lived experiences of self-efficacy in inclusive teaching contexts. The interview data were analysed thematically, guided by Bandura's self-efficacy theory. The findings indicate that English teachers generally demonstrate a high level of self-efficacy, which is shaped by mastery experiences in inclusive classrooms, professional collaboration, participation in professional development, and teachers' ability to regulate their emotional responses when facing instructional challenges. Teachers with higher self-efficacy showed greater confidence and flexibility in implementing adaptive instructional strategies and managing diverse student needs. This study contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth phenomenological understanding of how English teachers construct and experience self-efficacy in inclusive primary education contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a global priority since UNESCO introduced the Salamanca Statement in 1994, which emphasized the right of all children, including those with special needs, to receive education within regular schools. Inclusive education is not merely about placing students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms; instead, it requires

a fundamental transformation of educational systems to accommodate diverse learning needs and ensure equitable participation for all learners [1].

Many countries have implemented inclusive education policies through various models. For instance, Germany applies a collaborative co-teaching approach in which special education teachers work alongside general classroom teachers to adapt instructional methods and learning materials [2]. Similarly, the United States enforces inclusive education through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees equal access to education for students with disabilities and emphasizes collaboration among educators and professionals to provide individualized support within regular classrooms.

In line with these global developments, Indonesia has also committed to implementing inclusive education. Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution guarantees every citizen's right to education, while Law No. 8 of 2016 explicitly states that persons with disabilities are entitled to inclusive educational services. The Indonesian government promotes inclusive education as a means to create a supportive, non-discriminatory, and child-friendly learning environment in which students with and without special needs can learn together optimally [3].

Inclusive education places teachers at the center of its implementation. Teachers are required to design and manage learning environments that accommodate students with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and learning characteristics. According to Tarmansyah [4], inclusive education refers to an educational system that serves all children regardless of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic, or other differences. To achieve the goals of inclusive education, teachers must possess not only pedagogical knowledge but also confidence in their ability to teach students with special needs effectively [5].

However, implementing inclusive education is not without challenges. Teachers often encounter difficulties related to classroom management, instructional adaptation, student behavior, and emotional demands when teaching students with special needs [6]. These challenges highlight the importance of teacher self-efficacy, defined as teachers' beliefs in their ability to plan, organize, and execute teaching practices successfully [7]. In inclusive classroom contexts, teacher self-efficacy plays a crucial role in shaping how teachers respond to challenges, persist in difficult situations, and adopt inclusive instructional strategies [8].

Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate flexibility, resilience, and creativity in addressing diverse student needs, including those of students with special needs [9]. Conversely, teachers with low self-efficacy may experience stress, doubt their instructional abilities, and struggle to create positive learning environments, which can negatively affect student engagement and learning outcomes [10]. Therefore, strengthening teachers' self-efficacy is essential for improving the quality and sustainability of inclusive education practices.

Previous studies have investigated teacher self-efficacy in inclusive education contexts. For example, Damayanti et al. [11] examined the self-efficacy of prospective English teachers in implementing inclusive education, while Wahyuningsih et al. [12] explored primary school teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive settings. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most existing research has focused on secondary education, pre-

service teachers, or quantitative measurement of self-efficacy levels. Limited attention has been given to understanding how English teachers at the primary school level in Indonesia experience and construct their self-efficacy when teaching students with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

Within inclusive education, teacher self-efficacy is closely linked to the successful implementation of inclusive teaching practices. Teachers who believe in their ability to teach students with diverse needs are more likely to apply differentiated instruction, flexible classroom management, and adaptive learning strategies. They are also more willing to collaborate with special education teachers, parents, and other professionals to support students' learning and development [13]. In contrast, teachers with lower self-efficacy may resist inclusive practices, rely on traditional instructional methods, or feel overwhelmed by the demands of inclusive classrooms. These beliefs can limit teachers' responsiveness to students with special needs and reduce the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives. Therefore, understanding teacher self-efficacy from teachers' lived experiences is essential for improving inclusive teaching practices, particularly at the primary school level.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore English teachers' lived experiences of self-efficacy in inclusive primary school classrooms. A phenomenological perspective enables an in-depth examination of teachers' subjective meanings, beliefs, and emotional responses that shape their teaching practices—dimensions that quantitative methods alone cannot fully capture. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how English teachers experience and develop their self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs in inclusive primary school contexts. The study is guided by the following research question: How do English teachers experience their self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs in inclusive primary school classrooms?

2. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore English teachers' lived experiences of self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs in inclusive primary school classrooms. Phenomenological research seeks to understand how individuals experience and interpret a particular phenomenon by focusing on their perceptions, meanings, and personal reflections [14]. This approach was considered appropriate because teacher self-efficacy involves subjective beliefs, emotions, and interpretations that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement alone.

To complement the qualitative data, a questionnaire was used as a supporting instrument to provide an overall description of teachers' self-efficacy levels in inclusive teaching contexts. However, the primary emphasis of this study remained on the qualitative exploration of teachers' experiences.

The study was conducted in an inclusive primary school located in Medan, Indonesia. The participants were ten English teachers who taught both inclusive and regular classes at the school. Of the ten participating teachers, three (R1, R8, and R10) were selected for in-depth interviews. These participants were chosen to represent varied teaching experiences and levels of self-efficacy, as indicated by the questionnaire results. The use of participant codes ensured confidentiality and ethical compliance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings on English teachers' self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs in inclusive primary school classrooms. The findings are based on data collected through the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) questionnaire administered to ten English teachers, supported by semi-structured interview data from three selected participants (R1, R8, and R10). The questionnaire data are presented descriptively to illustrate teachers' levels of self-efficacy, while the interview data are used to triangulate and strengthen the interpretation of the quantitative findings.

3.1 Overall Level of English Teachers' Self-Efficacy in Inclusive Classrooms

The results of the TEIP questionnaire indicate that English teachers in this study demonstrate a generally high level of self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs. As shown in Table 4.2, the overall mean score for teachers' self-efficacy is 3.53, placing it in the "high" category. Individual TEIP scores range from 3.0 to 4.0, indicating relatively limited variation among respondents.

Two respondents (R1 and R5) obtained the highest mean score of 4.0, reflecting a very high level of confidence in their ability to implement inclusive teaching practices. These teachers expressed strong beliefs in their capacity to manage inclusive classrooms, adapt instructional strategies, and address the learning needs of students with special needs. Meanwhile, the remaining respondents achieved mean scores between 3.3 and 3.8, which also fall within the high self-efficacy category. Importantly, none of the respondents demonstrated low self-efficacy scores, suggesting that all participating teachers perceive themselves as sufficiently confident to teach in inclusive classroom settings.

Overall, these findings indicate that English teachers in this study possess a strong sense of self-efficacy in inclusive education, supported by their professional experience and teaching practices within the school context.

3.2 Percentage Distribution of Teacher Self-Efficacy Levels

To provide a clearer illustration of teachers' self-efficacy levels, the TEIP scores were converted into percentages and presented in Diagram 4.3. The percentage distribution shows that two respondents (R1 and R5) achieved a score of 100%, indicating exceptionally high self-efficacy. The remaining respondents scored between 75% and 95%, with the majority of teachers scoring above 80%.

The overall average percentage score was 88.25%, further confirming that the teachers' self-efficacy in this study falls within the high range. Notably, no respondents scored below 75%, indicating that none of the teachers perceived themselves as lacking confidence in teaching students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. This distribution suggests that teachers' confidence levels are relatively consistent, despite differences in experience and professional background.

3.3 Item Analysis of Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP)

Further analysis examined teachers' self-efficacy across specific aspects of inclusive teaching using item-level analysis of the TEIP questionnaire. As illustrated in Diagram 4.4,

all TEIP items obtained mean scores ranging from 3.2 to 3.9, indicating that teachers' self-efficacy across different dimensions of inclusive practice falls within the high to very high categories.

The highest mean score (3.9) was found in items related to professional collaboration, particularly teachers' ability to work with other professionals to design and implement educational plans for students with special needs. In addition, items related to classroom and behavior management—such as ensuring that students follow classroom rules and managing challenging behaviors—also achieved high mean scores (3.7). These results indicate that teachers feel particularly confident in managing inclusive classrooms and collaborating with other professionals.

In contrast, the lowest mean score (3.2) was found in items related to assisting families in supporting their children's learning. Although this score still falls within the high category, it suggests that family engagement is perceived as more challenging compared to other aspects of inclusive teaching. This finding highlights an area where teachers may benefit from additional support and professional development.

3.4 Triangulation with Interview Data

The questionnaire findings are supported by interview data from respondents R1, R8, and R10, which provide further insight into teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy. Teachers with high TEIP scores expressed confidence in managing inclusive classrooms and implementing adaptive instructional strategies.

R1 emphasized the importance of strong classroom management and collaboration in inclusive education:

“Effective inclusive education requires strong classroom management, differentiated instruction, positive teacher–student relationships, and collaboration among teachers, parents, and school staff.” (R1)

Similarly, R8 highlighted the need to adapt instructional strategies to students' individual needs:

“Each student is different based on their diagnosis, but we can use UDL or Universal Design for Learning strategies to make learning accessible and effective for all students.” (R8)

In addition, R10 linked their confidence to participation in professional training and workshops:

“I have taken several trainings and workshops online that helped me understand how to support students with diverse abilities in the classroom.” (R10)

These interview excerpts align with the high self-efficacy scores from the TEIP questionnaire, particularly in instructional adaptation, classroom management, and professional collaboration.

The findings indicate that English teachers in this study demonstrate a high level of self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs in inclusive primary school classrooms. The descriptive questionnaire data show strong confidence across various dimensions of inclusive teaching, while the interview data reinforce these findings by illustrating teachers' perceptions and experiences. Together, these results suggest that teachers' self-efficacy is

well established, particularly in classroom management, instructional adaptation, and professional collaboration, although family involvement remains a relatively more challenging area.

3.5 Discussion

This study investigated English teachers' self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs in inclusive primary school classrooms using descriptive questionnaire data supported by interview findings. The results indicate that teachers generally demonstrate a high level of self-efficacy, as reflected in the overall mean TEIP score and percentage distribution. This suggests that teachers possess strong confidence in their ability to implement inclusive teaching practices, including adapting instruction, managing diverse classrooms, and collaborating with relevant stakeholders.

The high level of teacher self-efficacy identified in this study aligns closely with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities significantly influence their motivation, persistence, and performance when facing challenges [7]. In inclusive classroom contexts, where teachers are required to address diverse learning needs, behavioral differences, and varying levels of student ability, strong self-efficacy beliefs are crucial for sustaining effective teaching practices. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to view challenges as manageable rather than threatening, thereby demonstrating greater resilience and instructional flexibility [17].

Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, indicating that teachers with high self-efficacy exhibit greater confidence in applying inclusive instructional strategies, differentiated teaching approaches, and proactive classroom management practices [8], [15]. Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin [18] emphasize that teacher self-efficacy is a key predictor of successful inclusive education, as it influences teachers' willingness to adapt curricula, employ individualized instruction, and maintain positive attitudes toward students with special needs. Moreover, high self-efficacy has been associated with reduced teacher stress and burnout in inclusive settings, further supporting sustainable inclusive practices [19].

Item-level analysis of the TEIP questionnaire revealed particularly high self-efficacy in the domains of classroom management and professional collaboration. These findings suggest that teachers feel confident in maintaining classroom order, managing student behavior, and creating structured learning environments that support students with diverse needs. Effective classroom management is widely recognized as a foundational component of inclusive education, as it allows teachers to minimize disruptions and maximize learning opportunities for all students [20].

High confidence in professional collaboration indicates that teachers perceive themselves as capable of working effectively with fellow teachers, special education professionals, and school administrators. Collaborative practices, such as co-teaching, shared planning, and interdisciplinary support, are essential in inclusive education, as they enable teachers to access diverse expertise and implement comprehensive support strategies for students with special needs [21]. Research by Friend et al. [22] highlights that collaborative competence enhances teachers' instructional effectiveness and contributes to more inclusive and responsive classroom environments.

Despite a high overall level of self-efficacy, teachers reported comparatively lower confidence in assisting families in supporting students' learning. Although this dimension remained within the high category, it suggests that family engagement continues to pose challenges in inclusive education contexts. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that teachers often feel insufficiently prepared to communicate with families of students with special needs or to involve parents meaningfully in the learning process [16], [23]. Barriers such as limited time, lack of training, and unclear role expectations can hinder effective family–school partnerships.

Family involvement is widely acknowledged as a critical factor in supporting students with special needs, as parental support can reinforce learning outcomes and promote students' social and emotional development [24]. However, without adequate institutional support, clear collaboration frameworks, and professional development focused on family engagement, teachers may struggle to translate their inclusive intentions into effective practice. Therefore, strengthening teachers' competence and confidence in family collaboration should be considered a priority in inclusive education policy and training programs.

Interview findings further supported the questionnaire results by providing contextual insights into teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms. Teachers described their confidence in managing classroom dynamics, adapting instructional materials, and collaborating with colleagues to address students' diverse needs. These qualitative findings reinforce the descriptive data and suggest that teachers' self-efficacy is shaped by accumulated teaching experience, ongoing professional interaction, and supportive school environments. Previous research confirms that positive school climates and access to professional support significantly enhance teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive settings [25].

In summary, the findings indicate that English teachers in this study demonstrate a high level of self-efficacy in inclusive primary school classrooms, particularly in classroom management, instructional adaptation, and professional collaboration. These strengths support effective inclusive teaching practices and align with established theoretical and empirical literature. Nevertheless, family engagement remains an area requiring further attention, professional development, and institutional support to ensure the holistic success of inclusive education.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined English teachers' self-efficacy in teaching students with special needs in inclusive primary school classrooms using descriptive questionnaire data supported by interview findings. The results indicate that teachers generally demonstrate a high level of self-efficacy in implementing inclusive teaching practices. Teachers reported strong confidence in classroom management, instructional adaptation, and professional collaboration, suggesting that they feel capable of addressing diverse learning needs within inclusive classroom settings.

Despite the overall high level of self-efficacy, the findings also reveal that assisting families in supporting students' learning is perceived as relatively more challenging. This

indicates that family–school collaboration remains an area that requires additional attention and structured support in inclusive education contexts.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of teacher self-efficacy in the successful implementation of inclusive education at the primary school level. Teachers' confidence appears to be shaped by teaching experience, collaboration with other professionals, and access to professional development opportunities. These findings suggest that ongoing training and institutional support are essential to strengthen inclusive teaching practices, particularly in family engagement.

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