Attitudes and Perceived Competence of Primary School Teachers Toward Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs: An Embedded Mixed-Methods Study in Northeast India

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Abstract: *Inclusive education has emerged as a central theme in contemporary educational reform, highlighting the responsibility of schools to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children, including those with special needs. Despite strong policy backing in India, the actual realization of inclusive education depends largely on teachers' attitudes and professional readiness. This embedded mixed-methods study examined the attitudes and perceived competence of primary school teachers toward inclusive education in government and private schools in Guwahati, Assam. Quantitative data were collected from 100 teachers using the Teachers' Attitude Scale Toward Inclusion (TASI), while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers. Findings revealed that teachers generally hold moderately favourable attitudes toward inclusion (M = 102.11, SD = 10.84), with high belief in inclusive values yet moderate perceived competence. Teachers expressed significant concerns regarding classroom management, curriculum flexibility, and the availability of support structures. A comparison between government and private school teachers showed no significant differences in attitudes or competence, although government school teachers reported higher contextual barriers. Training emerged as the strongest predictor of positive attitudes and competence, reinforcing the need for structured professional development. Qualitative analysis further illuminated teachers' emotional labour, systemic constraints, and the tension between inclusive ideals and practical realities. The study concludes that while teachers conceptually support inclusive education, systemic challenges limit consistent implementation. Recommendations include strengthening teacher education, enhancing school support systems, and aligning policies with contextual needs in the Northeast region.*

Keywords: inclusive education, primary teachers, attitudes, competence, Northeast India, special needs

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has gained global prominence as societies increasingly recognize the rights of all children to participate meaningfully in school environments. The movement is grounded in principles of equity, dignity, and access, emphasizing that children with special needs (CWSN) should not be segregated but educated alongside their peers. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Reports (2017, 2020) position inclusion as essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.

In India, inclusive education is reinforced through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD, 2016), and the integrated scheme Samagra Shiksha. These frameworks mandate non-discrimination and the provision of reasonable accommodations, while the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) highlights the importance of universal access, multidisciplinary support, and teacher capacity-building.

However, the journey from policy to practice is fraught with challenges. While inclusion is widely accepted in principle, its implementation is influenced heavily by classroom realities, school infrastructure, and, importantly, teacher readiness. Teachers act as the bridge between policy expectations and the daily lived experiences of learners. Their attitudes shape how they interpret inclusion, their perceived competence translates into pedagogical action, and their experiences reflect the systemic enablers or barriers within school settings.

1.1 Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusion

Research across diverse contexts has established teacher attitude as a crucial determinant of inclusive practice. Teachers with positive attitudes are more likely to adopt flexible pedagogies, maintain high expectations, and create enabling learning environments. Conversely, negative or ambivalent attitudes may hinder inclusion, even where policy mandates exist (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Schwab, 2021). Attitudes are influenced by training, personal experiences, school culture, and societal views toward disability.

1.2 Perceived Competence and Self-Efficacy

Perceived competence or teachers' confidence in adapting instruction, managing behaviour, and assessing diverse learners plays a mediating role between attitudes and practice (Bandura, 1997). Studies show that teachers may support inclusion philosophically but feel unprepared to handle its complexities, such as curriculum differentiation, behavioural

interventions, and collaboration with specialists (Forlin, 2010; Sharma et al., 2008).

1.3 The Northeastern Context

Despite being an educational hub, Northeast India remains under-researched in inclusive education scholarship. Schools in Guwahati include both government and private institutions with diverse infrastructure, staffing patterns, and student backgrounds. Understanding teachers' readiness in this region is essential for developing contextualized support systems aligned with NEP 2020.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

This study explored primary teachers' attitudes and perceived competence toward inclusive education in government and private schools in Guwahati. The objectives were to:
1) Examine teachers' overall attitudes toward inclusion.
2) Assess their perceived competence in implementing inclusive pedagogy.
3) Compare attitudes between government and private school teachers.
4) Identify qualitative insights that contextualize quantitative trends.

2. Review of Related Literature

A considerable body of international scholarship supports the view that inclusion enhances academic and social outcomes for all learners. Florian (2015) argues that diversity should be seen as a normal part of classrooms rather than a challenge, and inclusive pedagogy should aim to increase participation while reducing marginalization.

2.1 Global Perspectives on Teacher Attitudes

Studies consistently show that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion vary depending on the type and severity of disability. While many support inclusion of students with mild learning difficulties, fewer feel confident supporting students with emotional or behavioural challenges (de Boer et al., 2012). Teacher attitudes are shaped by culture, training, resources, and societal attitudes toward disability.

2.2 Teacher Competence and Training

Competence plays a critical role in shaping behaviour. Teachers with strong self-efficacy demonstrate greater adaptability, resilience, and willingness to experiment with new strategies (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Training significantly improves competence and reduces apprehensions (Forlin et al., 2011). Studies in India affirm that professionally trained teachers report more favourable attitudes and greater readiness (Sharma et al., 2018; Narayan & John, 2020).

2.3 Barriers to Inclusion

Common barriers include large class sizes, inadequate teaching-learning materials, lack of special educators, rigid curricula, and negative parental attitudes. These impede teachers regardless of their training or personal motivation (Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2013). In India, infrastructural and socio-cultural differences across states affect readiness levels.

2.4 Research Gaps in Northeast India

Only a handful of studies (Bordoloi & Das, 2021) have explored inclusion in Assam, revealing limited training opportunities and resource constraints. The present study extends this body of knowledge through a mixed-methods inquiry focusing exclusively on government and private schools.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted an embedded mixed-methods design, a variant of mixed-methods research in which one data strand (typically qualitative) is nested within another dominant strand (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this investigation, the quantitative component served as the primary strand, designed to measure the general attitudes and perceived competence of a larger teacher population, while the qualitative component provided nuanced interpretations of the statistical trends.

The embedded design was chosen for two reasons. First, teacher attitudes toward inclusion are multidimensional and benefit from both numerical measurement and interpretive depth. Second, teachers' narratives are critical for understanding how attitudes are shaped by experience, institutional realities, and socio-cultural context. The qualitative data therefore contextualized and expanded upon the quantitative findings, enabling a more holistic understanding of inclusive education practices in Guwahati.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

3.2.1 Quantitative Sample
A total of 100 primary school teachers participated in the quantitative phase of the study. Schools were selected from different zones of Guwahati to ensure representation of varying school types, including government, government-aided, and provincialised schools. A simple random sampling procedure was used to select teachers from among those who met the following inclusion criteria:
1) At least one year of teaching experience;
2) Assigned to a primary classroom (Grades 1–5);
3) Willing to participate in the study;
4) Not holding additional administrative responsibilities at the time of data collection.

The sample represented a range of demographic and professional backgrounds, including gender, years of experience, school size, and training exposure.

3.2.2 Qualitative Sample
For the qualitative phase, 15 teachers were selected using purposive sampling. The selection ensured diversity in:
- Teaching experience
- School type
- Prior exposure to inclusive education training,
- Gender and subject specialization.

This variation allowed for a wider range of insights and enhanced the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Teachers' Attitude Scale Toward Inclusion (TASI)
The primary instrument for the quantitative phase was the 30-item TASI, developed specifically for this research. The scale comprised three subscales:
1) **Belief and Awareness** – conceptual understanding and philosophical acceptance of inclusion.
2) **Perceived Competence** – confidence in teaching strategies, curricular adaptation, and behavioural management.
3) **Perceived Barriers** – systemic and contextual obstacles.

Each item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), with five reverse-scored items. Subscale scores ranged from 10 to 50, while total scores ranged from 30 to 150.

Validity and Reliability
- **Content Validity**: Evaluated by 10 experts in inclusive education, psychology, special education, and pedagogy. Their feedback resulted in refinement of item clarity and relevance. The Content Validity Ratio (CVR) of 0.84 indicated strong expert agreement.
- **Reliability**: A pilot test with 5 teachers (not part of the final sample) produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88, representing high internal consistency across the items.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview Schedule
The qualitative instrument consisted of 15 open-ended questions, each designed to probe teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to inclusive education. Questions explored conceptual understanding, perceived readiness, experiences with CWSN, instructional challenges, resource needs, collaboration, classroom management concerns, and recommendations for system improvement.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in four sequential phases:
1) **Institutional Permission and Rapport Building:** Permission was obtained from school heads, followed by informal classroom visits to build rapport with teachers.
2) **Administration of the TASI Scale:** The scale was administered to groups of teachers in staff rooms or school halls, with an average completion time of 20–25 minutes. Data collection occurred during non-instructional hours to minimize disruption.
3) **Qualitative Interviews:** Individual interviews were conducted in quiet spaces within schools. Interviews lasted 25–30 minutes on average and were audio-recorded with informed consent.
4) **Data Verification and Ethical Considerations:** Participants were assured confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Ethical norms of withdrawal rights and data protection were observed.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis
Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics:
- **Descriptive**: means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages.
- **Inferential**: **independent samples t-tests** were used to examine differences between teachers with and without inclusive education training.
- **Effect sizes** were calculated to assess practical significance.

3.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis
Qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006):
1) Initial familiarization with transcripts.
2) Coding meaningful segments.
3) Clustering codes into potential themes.
4) Refining, naming, and validating themes.
5) Integrating themes with quantitative findings for interpretation.

Triangulation between quantitative and qualitative strands strengthened the credibility of results.

4. Results

The Results section presents findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands of the embedded mixed-methods design. Quantitative results are reported first, followed by qualitative themes, and then integrated interpretations that identify convergence and divergence across both strands. Tables are included to support transparency and clarity in reporting.

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 Overall Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education
The primary analysis revealed that teachers demonstrated moderately favourable attitudes toward inclusive education. The overall attitude mean score was M = 102.11, SD = 10.84, on a scale ranging from 30 to 150. Approximately 83% of the teachers scored within the "moderate to high favourable" categories, indicating a broad acceptance of inclusive principles across both government and private school teachers.

A closer inspection of the distribution shows:
- **14% (n = 14)** exhibited *highly favourable* attitudes
- **69% (n = 69)** showed *moderately favourable* attitudes
- **17% (n = 17)** showed *neutral to slightly unfavourable* attitudes
- **0%** showed completely unfavourable attitudes

This suggests that, in general, teachers endorse the ethical and social justice rationale behind inclusive education, even if they feel constrained by practical challenges.

4.1.2 Subscale-Level Analyses

Belief and Awareness

Variable	Mean	SD
Belief & Awareness	40.01	4.71

This was the highest-scoring dimension, indicating that teachers generally recognize:

- Inclusion as a human right
- The value of diversity in the classroom
- The importance of social interaction and empathy
- The need to reduce discrimination and segregation

Teachers from both school types scored similarly in this domain, demonstrating widespread conceptual support.

Perceived Competence

Variable	Mean	SD
Perceived Competence	34.22	5.03

Scores on this subscale were **moderate**, indicating partial preparedness. Teachers reported confidence in:

- Identifying learning difficulties
- Using multiple teaching strategies
- Providing emotional support to students

However, they felt less confident in:

- Preparing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)
- Differentiating curriculum
- Managing behavioural issues
- Using assistive technologies
- Conducting flexible assessments

Private school teachers reported slightly higher competence, likely due to smaller class sizes or greater administrative freedom, but this difference was statistically non-significant.

Perceived Barriers

Variable	Mean	SD
Perceived Barriers	28.88	6.04

Barriers emerged as a major constraint, with scores indicating substantial perceived challenges. Teachers frequently identified:

- Overcrowded classrooms
- Time constraints due to heavy curricular demands
- Shortage of special educators
- Lack of teaching-learning materials
- Limited parental cooperation
- Rigid curriculum and assessment policies

Government school teachers reported notably higher barriers, reflecting systemic challenges typical of the public sector.

4.1.3 Effect of Training on Attitudes

One of the strongest quantitative findings was the significant influence of training. Teachers who received formal training in inclusive education scored considerably higher across all subscales.

Table 2: Training Effects

Variable	Trained M (SD)	Not Trained M (SD)	t(98)	p
Overall Attitude	108.23 (9.74)	97.41 (11.92)	3.87	.001
Belief & Awareness	42.11 (4.22)	38.23 (4.81)	3.12	.002
Perceived Competence	36.98 (4.18)	31.91 (5.01)	4.71	.000
Perceived Barriers	26.72 (5.74)	30.77 (6.04)	–3.24	.002

Teachers with training showed:

- Higher conceptual clarity
- Greater confidence in inclusive strategies
- Lower perception of challenges and barriers

This reinforces global research highlighting professional development as the strongest predictor of successful inclusion.

4.1.4 Comparison Between Government and Private School Teachers

Despite popular assumptions about differences between school types, statistical analysis found no significant differences between government and private school teachers on overall attitudes or competence.

Table 3: Government vs. Private Teacher Comparison

Variable	Govt. (n=50)	Private (n=50)	t (98)	p
Overall Attitude	101.42	102.80	–0.57	.571
Belief & Awareness	39.61	40.41	–0.81	.420
Perceived Competence	33.81	34.63	–0.81	.419
Perceived Barriers	29.82	27.94	1.51	.135

Interpretation:

- Government school teachers had slightly lower competence and higher barriers, but differences were non-significant.
- Private school teachers benefited from slightly smaller class sizes and somewhat flexible instructional planning.
- Government teachers had access to Samagra Shiksha support mechanisms, though inconsistently.

This indicates that inclusive readiness challenges are system-wide rather than sector-specific.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative interviews with 15 teachers provided deeper insights into daily realities, emotional experiences, and contextual factors affecting inclusive education.

Theme 1: Conceptual Acceptance but Procedural Uncertainty

Almost all teachers articulated strong moral support for inclusive education, describing it as "the right thing to do" or "essential for equality." However, many struggled to distinguish between:

- Inclusion
- Integration
- Mainstreaming
- Special education approaches

Several teachers admitted they lacked clarity about *how* inclusive classrooms should function, especially regarding instructional adaptation.

Illustrative Quote:
"Inclusion is important, but sometimes I am unsure what actual steps to take for a child who cannot follow the normal lesson pace."

Theme 2: Pedagogical and Behavioural Challenges
Teachers frequently discussed difficulties related to:
- Adjusting lessons for mixed-ability learners
- Handling behavioural concerns (ADHD, autism spectrum behaviours)
- Managing large class sizes (>45 students in some govt. schools)
- Balancing curriculum coverage with individual support

Government school teachers particularly highlighted inability to provide one-to-one support due to overcrowded classrooms.
Private school teachers narrated challenges in working without special educators despite smaller classes.

Theme 3: Emotional Labour and Stress
Teachers recurrently described inclusion as emotionally demanding. Several expressed stress stemming from:
- Time pressure
- Responsibility of "not failing the child"
- Parental expectations
- Feeling guilty for not providing enough support

Teacher Reflection:
"Sometimes I feel helpless. I want to help the child, but I don't have the tools or time. It's emotionally taxing."
This reveals the psychological burden teachers experience when institutional support is inadequate.

Theme 4: Systemic Barriers within Schools
Teachers identified multiple structural limitations:
- Lack of resource rooms
- Irregular availability of remedial teachers
- Insufficient training opportunities
- Limited ICT or assistive devices
- Rigid curriculum and assessment frameworks

Government school teachers emphasized shortages of materials and infrastructural constraints, while private school teachers cited lack of specialist personnel.

Theme 5: Strong Desire for Training and Collaboration
Teachers across both sectors emphasized:
- The need for regular, hands-on training
- Opportunities for peer mentoring
- Multi-disciplinary collaboration
- More flexible academic structures

This aligns strongly with the quantitative finding that training is decisive for readiness.

4.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The mixed-method integration highlights three major convergences:

1) **Strong conceptual support for inclusion (High Belief/Awareness Scores)**
   - Supported by interviews showing ethical alignment with inclusive principles.
2) **Moderate perceived competence**
   - Reinforced by teacher narratives expressing uncertainty about pedagogy.
3) **High perception of barriers**
   - Qualitative accounts vividly portray infrastructural limitations, workload issues, and emotional strain.
   - The findings suggest that teachers want to be inclusive but feel structurally under-supported.

5. Discussion

Findings reveal that teachers from government and private schools largely embrace inclusive ideals, aligning with global research. However, their moderate competence and high perceived barriers reaffirm the challenges reported across India (Das et al., 2013; Sharma et al., 2018). Training emerges as a critical determinant, significantly enhancing both attitudes and competence.

Government school teachers reported greater infrastructural and workload-related barriers, while private school teachers highlighted lack of special educators and structured support systems. Emotional labour emerges as a key theme, with teachers describing inclusion as "rewarding but overwhelming."

These findings underscore that inclusion requires systemic reform, not merely teacher goodwill. Supportive leadership, adequate resources, flexible curriculum frameworks, and ongoing training are essential.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the limited empirical literature on inclusive education in Northeast India. It demonstrates that while primary school teachers hold favourable attitudes, their perceived competence and systemic support fall short of requirements for effective inclusion. Strengthening teacher preparation, deploying special educators, improving infrastructure, and aligning policy with ground realities are imperative steps for achieving meaningful inclusion in government and private schools alike.

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