



Investigating the Nature and Implementation of Governmental Policies on the Inclusion of Students with Mild/Moderate Disabilities in General Education Settings in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

The government of Saudi Arabia has made significant efforts to provide inclusive education for students with disabilities. Inclusive education enables students with disabilities to receive the educational services and opportunities alongside their non-disabled peers. However, educational systems across the world face challenges in achieving effective inclusion. This study examines the extent to which existing educational policies in Saudi Arabia encourage the inclusion of students with mild to moderate disabilities in general education classrooms, focusing specifically on the perspectives and lived experiences of special education teachers working in elementary schools. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study analyzed semi-structured interviews with seven special education teachers. Findings identified four superordinate themes: (a) varied depth in understanding and inconsistent implementation of inclusion policies; (b) greater need of institutional and administrative support; (c) instructional and pedagogical challenges; and (d) social and psychological dimensions of inclusion. Results revealed systemic gaps including policy ambiguity, insufficient professional training, inadequate resources, and limited administrative support.

Keywords: Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

Introduction:

The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings has become a central focus of educational policy worldwide. For Saudi Arabia, a country whose formal special education history spans only six decades, the challenge of achieving meaningful inclusive education remains ongoing. Although the Saudi government has enacted numerous legislative reforms aimed at integrating students with mild to moderate disabilities into mainstream classrooms, significant gaps persist between policy intent and classroom practice (Aldabas, 2015; Aldousari & Dunn, 2022).

Inclusive education provides students with disabilities the opportunity to receive the same educational services and participate alongside non-disabled peers, fostering both academic achievement and social development (UNESCO, 1994). In Saudi Arabia, public schooling became compulsory in 1925, yet the national government did not initially provide support or services for students with disabilities (Aldabas, 2015). The first formal special education program was introduced in 1958 through private initiative, and it was not until 1960 that the government established the first official special school—the Al-Noor Institute—for students with visual impairments (Abu Alghayth et al., 2022).

Over subsequent decades, Saudi Arabia's special education infrastructure expanded considerably. By 1987, the government had opened 27 specialized schools, and an integration strategy launched in 1991 sought to introduce special education within public schools. Today, approximately 7,016 government special education programs



operate across the kingdom, staffed by over 8,000 special education teachers (Alshamari, 2019). Despite this expansion, the country remains in the preliminary stages of achieving genuine inclusion, with students having severe disabilities still educated in segregated settings (Aldabas, 2015).

Legislative milestones including the 1987 Disability Legislation, the 2001 Regulations of Special Education Programs and Institutes, and the 2004 updated Disability Act have progressively emphasized equal rights and individualized educational programs for students with disabilities. The Ministry of Education has aligned its policies with the social model of disability, which frames disability as a socially constructed barrier requiring collective action rather than an individual problem (Oliver, 1990). Nevertheless, studies consistently identify persistent barriers to implementation, including negative attitudes, inadequate teacher training, insufficient resources, and limited societal acceptance (Alharti & Evans, 2017; Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Alnahdi et al., 2019).

The present study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of special education teachers in Riyadh's elementary schools. It investigates how teachers interpret and apply inclusive education policies in everyday practice, illuminates real-world challenges, and identifies systemic deficiencies requiring reform. By grounding the analysis in three complementary theoretical frameworks—Friedman's (2003) model of policy implementation, Allport's (1954) contact theory, and Oliver's (1990) social model of disability—the study provides a nuanced, theoretically integrated account of inclusive education policy implementation in the Saudi context.

Historical Context of Special Education in Saudi Arabia The evolution of special education in Saudi Arabia (see Table 1) reflects a gradual shift from exclusion to a nascent form of inclusion. Following the establishment of the Al-Noor Institute in 1960, specialized institutes for students with hearing impairments (Al-Amal Institutes) and intellectual disabilities (Intellectual Education Institute) were founded throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Government support was formalized in 1962 through the creation of the Special Education Unit within the Ministry of Education (Alquraini, 2010).

Table 1

Historical Timeline of Special Education in Saudi Arabia

Year established	Type of disability	Institution	Gender served
1958	Blindness	Private	Adult (general)
1960	Blindness	Al-Noor Institute (government)	Boys
1964	Blindness	Al-Noor Institute (government)	Girls
1964	Deafness	Al-Amal Institute (government)	Boys
1964	Deafness	Al-Amal Institute (government)	Girls
1971	Intellectual disabilities	Intellectual Education Institute	Girls/Boys
1971–1987	Blindness Deafness Intellectual disabilities	27 institutes	Girls/boys
1987 and 2000	Blindness Deafness Intellectual disabilities	27 more special education schools	Boys/Girls
Currently	Blindness Deafness Intellectual disabilities Physical disabilities, autism, and LD.	Special education in general education classrooms/special day schools	Boys/Girls



Between 1987 and 2000, Saudi Arabia experienced significant growth, with specialized schools increasing from 27 to 54 (Aldabas, 2015). The government's 1991 integration initiative marked a turning point, introducing special education classrooms within public schools and signaling a shift toward more inclusive models. The Rules and Regulations for Special Education Programs (RRSEP) established quality standards and articulated students' rights to education. Subsequent policy frameworks, including the 2016 Regulatory Guide for Special Education (RGSE) and the 2024 Inclusive Education Policy, have further codified commitments to inclusion.

Saudi Arabia has also adopted the social model of disability as a guiding framework. The Ministry of Education has implemented policies mandating reasonable accommodations—including Braille materials, sign language interpreters, and assistive technologies—and has invested in professional development programs emphasizing differentiated instruction and universal design for learning (Ministry of Education, 2024a). Partnerships with organizations such as the Saudi Disability Society have extended support resources for students with diverse needs. Despite these advances, research consistently identifies gaps between policy aspirations and practical implementation (Gibbs & Bozaid, 2022).

Literature Review:

Research on inclusive education has grown substantially over the past three decades, establishing a robust evidence base regarding both its benefits and the challenges of effective implementation. This review synthesizes scholarship pertinent to the Saudi context, organized around three areas: global frameworks and definitions of inclusion, barriers and facilitators of implementation, and the specific case of Saudi Arabia.

Defining and Conceptualizing Inclusive Education Inclusive education is broadly defined as an approach in which students with disabilities receive educational services alongside their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms, with appropriate accommodations and supports (UNESCO, 1994). The concept encompasses not only physical placement but also meaningful participation, academic engagement, and social belonging. Contemporary definitions emphasize that inclusion requires systemic transformation of educational environments, curricula, and pedagogies, rather than simply relocating students from segregated settings (Thomas, 1997).

The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990, 2013) has been particularly influential in shaping inclusive education policy and practice. By locating disability in environmental and institutional barriers rather than individual impairments, this model argues that achieving inclusion requires dismantling systemic obstacles including inaccessible curricula, negative attitudes, inadequate supports, and exclusive institutional cultures. In contrast, the medical model—which focuses on individual pathology and remediation—tends to perpetuate segregated, deficit-oriented approaches (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013; Shakespeare, 2006; Tugli et al., 2014).

Barriers to Inclusive Education Implementation International research identifies a consistent set of barriers that impede effective inclusive education. Teacher attitudes constitute one of the most frequently cited obstacles: studies in diverse national contexts find that teachers with negative or ambivalent views of inclusion are less likely to implement inclusive practices effectively (Boyle et al., 2013; Lüke & Grosche, 2017). Schwab et al. (2018) demonstrated that students' perceptions of inclusion are significantly linked to their emotional well-being and that supportive teacher-student relationships are critical to fostering positive inclusion climates.

Professional preparation and training represent another central barrier. Research consistently shows that teachers who lack adequate preservice and in-service training in inclusive practices feel unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Chiner & Cardona, 2013). Inadequate resources—including assistive technologies, specialized materials, and support personnel—further constrain teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices (Alharti & Evans, 2017). At the administrative level, inconsistent leadership support and unclear policy communication impede systematic implementation (Friedman, 2003; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

Social and psychological dimensions also merit attention. Lindner et al. (2019) found that peers' beliefs and attitudes significantly affect the social participation of students with disabilities, with negative peer relationships limiting



meaningful inclusion. Hopkins et al. (2018) demonstrated that awareness programs can reshape perceptions and promote more inclusive environments. Contact theory (Allport, 1954) provides a foundational account of how structured, meaningful intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and facilitate positive peer relationships, underscoring the importance of intentional pedagogical design.

Inclusive Education in Saudi Arabia. Research on inclusive education in Saudi Arabia reflects a complex picture of legislative commitment alongside persistent implementation challenges. Aldabas (2015, 2020) documented the historical development of Saudi special education and identified ongoing issues of social isolation and inadequate peer integration for students with disabilities. Alnahdi et al. (2019) found that many Saudi teachers feel unprepared to support students with disabilities, citing significant gaps in training and resource availability.

Gibbs and Bozaid (2022) identified a pronounced gap between policy intent and classroom practice, noting that while some educators support inclusion, others express skepticism about achievable outcomes in mainstream settings. Alharti and Evans (2017) reported that policy implementation is hampered by insufficient resources, inadequate teacher training, and limited societal acceptance. Alfawzan and Almulhim (2024) highlighted barriers to implementing transition services, underscoring the systemic nature of challenges facing students with intellectual disabilities. Collectively, these studies establish that despite significant legislative progress, Saudi Arabia has yet to achieve meaningful inclusion for students with disabilities across its educational system.

This study builds on and extends this literature by providing an in-depth, phenomenological account of teachers' lived experiences—a perspective that remains underrepresented in the Saudi inclusive education literature—and by integrating multiple theoretical frameworks to interpret findings at the intersections of policy, pedagogy, and social dynamics.

Research Question. This study was guided by the following research question: To what extent do existing educational policies in Saudi Arabia encourage and facilitate the inclusion of students with mild to moderate disabilities in general education classrooms, according to the perspectives and lived experiences of special education teachers in Riyadh elementary schools?

Methodology:

Ethics: This study was conducted in compliance with all local, state, and federal regulations pertaining to research with human subjects. All research activities were fully approved by relevant Institutional Review Boards. All participants provided informed consent and were free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Research Design This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2021). IPA is well-suited to research questions concerned with how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds, particularly when the goal is to understand the meaning-making processes of participants within specific experiential contexts. Given the study's aim of exploring teachers' lived experiences of inclusive education policy implementation, IPA provided an appropriate methodology for generating rich, nuanced accounts of subjective experience.

IPA involves a double hermeneutic process: participants attempt to make sense of their experiences, and the researcher attempts to make sense of participants' sense-making (Smith et al., 2021). Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, with findings emerging from close engagement with interview transcripts rather than being imposed by predetermined categories. The study prioritized depth of understanding over breadth, consistent with IPA's epistemological commitment to idiographic analysis.

Participants Participants were seven special education teachers employed in elementary schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met specific inclusion criteria: current employment as a special education teacher in a Riyadh elementary school, a minimum of three years of experience working in inclusive education settings, and direct involvement in implementing inclusive education policies. Snowball sampling supplemented purposive recruitment (Parker et al., 2019).



The sample comprised of six male and one female participants, ranging in age from 31 to 38 years. Teaching experience ranged from 9 to 14 years. Five participants held bachelor's degrees in special education and two held master's degrees. Six participants had received formal training related to inclusive education practices; one had not received any formal inclusion training. All participants had direct experience instructing students with disabilities in inclusive settings, providing a diverse but focused range of perspectives. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms: Moha, Sara, Ghaith, Ahmed, Hamed, Talal, and Omer.

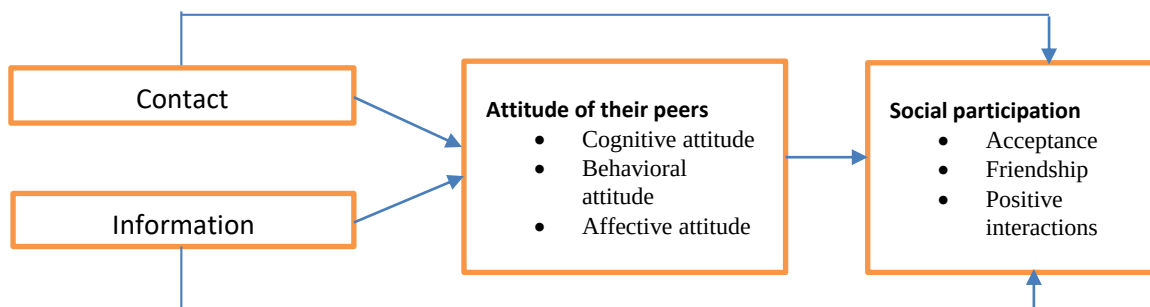
Data Collection Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted in Arabic, the participants' native language. Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions of inclusive education policies, their understanding and application of policy directives, the challenges encountered in practice, and their views on institutional support and social dynamics in inclusive classrooms.

The research protocol received Institutional Review Board approval prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent, were informed of their right to withdraw, and were assured of confidentiality. Given the hierarchical nature of Saudi educational culture, particular attention was paid to creating conditions in which participants felt comfortable sharing candid perspectives (Kang & Hwang, 2021; Kaiser, 2009).

Data Analysis Interview transcripts were analyzed using IPA procedures as described by Smith et al. (2021). Analysis proceeded through five stages: (a) immersive reading and re-reading of each transcript; (b) generating initial notes and observations; (c) developing emergent themes; (d) identifying connections between emergent themes within and across transcripts; and (e) developing superordinate and subordinate themes. Throughout the analytic process, reflexivity was maintained through memo-writing and audit trails to enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was further enhanced through member checking, in which preliminary interpretations were shared with participants for verification, and through peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with IPA methodology.

Theoretical Framework The study employed three complementary theoretical frameworks (See Figure 1). Friedman's (2003) model of policy implementation guided analysis of how policy directives are translated into classroom practice, emphasizing the centrality of clear communication, administrative coherence, and adequate resource provision (See Figure 2). Allport's (1954) contact theory provided a lens for examining how interpersonal contact and structured peer interactions influence attitudes toward disability and the quality of social integration in inclusive settings. Oliver's (1990) social model of disability framed disability as arising from environmental and institutional barriers rather than individual impairments, directing attention toward systemic structures that impede or facilitate inclusion.

Figure 1
Construction of Theoretical Framework

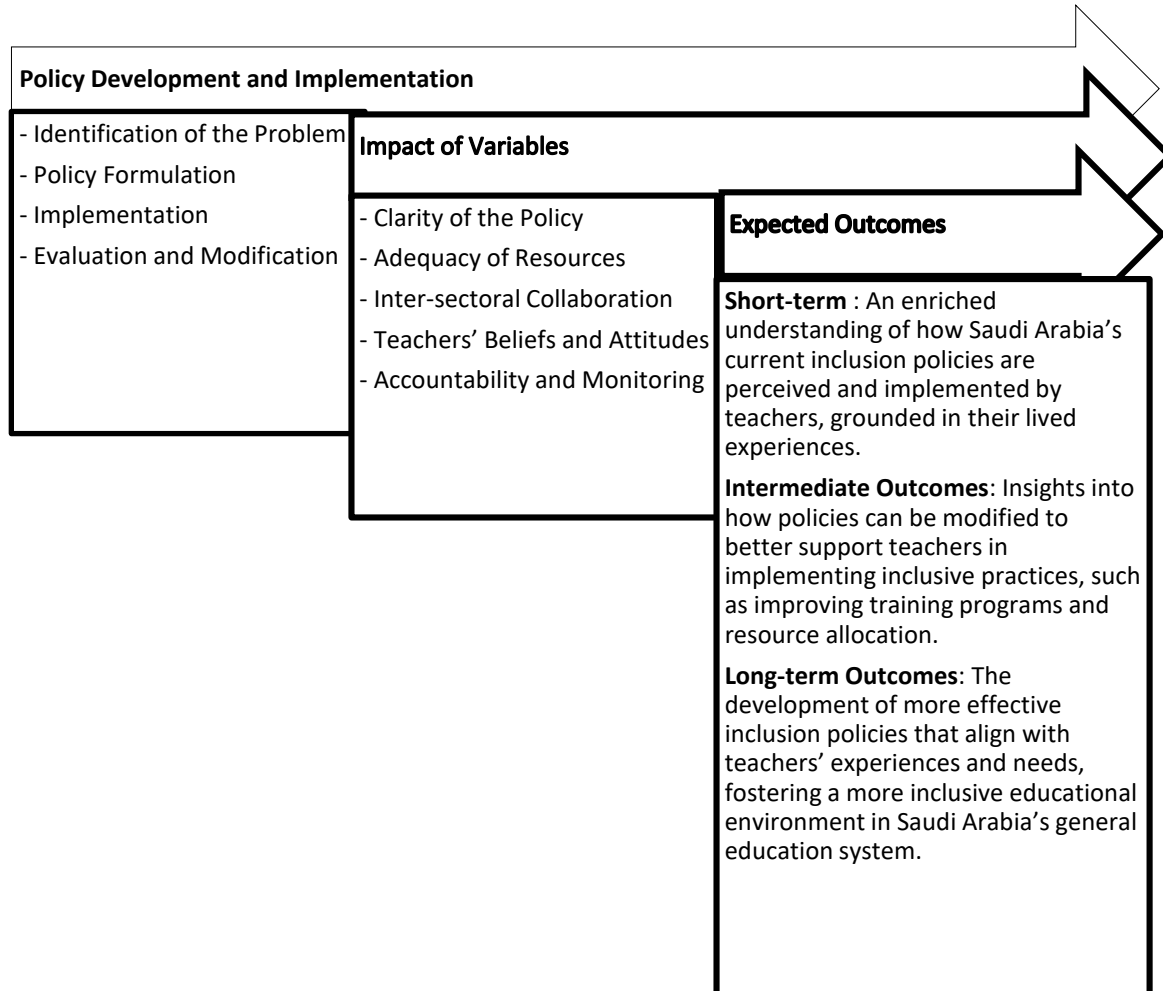




Together, these frameworks provided a multidimensional analytical structure that accounted for the policy, social, and structural dimensions of inclusive education implementation. Their integration enabled a deeper, contextually nuanced interpretation of teachers' lived experiences and the institutional conditions shaping their practice.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework Adapted from Friedman's (2003) Policy Development and Implementation Model



Findings:

Analysis yielded four superordinate themes, each comprising multiple subordinate themes, that capture the core dimensions of teachers' experiences implementing inclusive education policies in Riyadh elementary schools.

Superordinate Theme 1: Varied Depth in Understanding and Disjointed Implementation of Inclusion Policies

The first superordinate theme reflects significant variation in teachers' comprehension of inclusion policy directives and fragmented, inconsistent implementation practices. All seven participants reported experiencing some degree of ambiguity regarding policy requirements, and all identified substantial challenges linked to inadequate



professional training, scarce resources, and limited institutional support. Three subordinate themes emerged from these accounts.

Ambiguity and Inconsistent Interpretation of Inclusion Policies Four participants (Ahmed, Ghaith, Hamed, and Talal) emphasized the ambiguity and inconsistency inherent in how inclusion policies were communicated and interpreted. Ahmed described his experience: "I haven't received any training or clarification. I've learned through hands-on experience. There weren't clear guidelines when I started." Ghaith expressed similar frustrations: "The policies themselves weren't always clear or accessible. Sometimes the regulations seemed rigid, and at other times, their implementation was left to the teacher's discretion."

Hamed identified a pronounced disconnect between theoretical policy knowledge and practical application: "Regarding the regulations, I recall studying them during my undergraduate degree... However, in practice, things are completely different and unclear." Talal captured the fundamental problem succinctly: "Everything was theoretical—written regulations available for any teacher to access, but with no guidance on how to understand or implement them."

These accounts reflect what Friedman (2003) identifies as a critical failure in policy dissemination: the absence of clear, actionable communication from policymakers to practitioners. From the social model perspective (Oliver, 1990), this ambiguity constitutes an institutional barrier that impedes teachers' capacity to enact inclusive practices, shifting responsibility for inclusion onto individual teachers without providing the systemic support they require. The inconsistent interpretation of policies also obstructs the structured intergroup contact emphasized by contact theory (Allport, 1954), limiting teachers' ability to design meaningful interactions between students with and without disabilities.

Limited Training and Inadequate Resources Five participants (Ahmed, Mohammed, Omer, Sara, and Talal) explicitly described the negative impact of insufficient professional training and inadequate resources on their ability to implement inclusion policies. Ahmed stated: "Implementation is left entirely up to individual teachers due to insufficient training and resources." Mohammed reinforced this: "It's present, but not completely or perfectly. It often depends on individual efforts."

Omer highlighted the absence of collaborative frameworks mandated by policy: "Policies state that decisions should be made by a multidisciplinary team, but in practice, specialists often make decisions alone." Sara linked inadequate administrative knowledge to poor outcomes: "Academic inclusion is weak. Unfortunately, this is due to the school principal's lack of understanding of special education policies and legislation." Talal described the isolating effect of insufficient guidance: "Teachers were left to interpret and apply the policies on their own without clear guidelines or support."

These findings resonate with Friedman's (2003) argument that effective policy implementation requires comprehensive institutional backing, including professional development and clear communication. The absence of sustained training perpetuates reliance on a medical model orientation (Shakespeare, 2006), in which teachers focus on individual student deficits rather than addressing systemic barriers—the inverse of the structural reform emphasized by the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990).

Gap Between Policy Expectations and Classroom Practices All seven participants acknowledged a substantial gap between what inclusion policies prescribe and what occurs in practice. Omer described disconnected decision-making: "Policies state that decisions should be made by a multidisciplinary team, but in practice, specialists often make decisions alone. Sometimes, as a teacher, a student is suddenly placed in your class without prior consultation or assessment." Ghaith characterized existing inclusion efforts as superficial: "Even in semi-integrated programs, the inclusion is often superficial."

Mohammed articulated the underlying structural problem: "The biggest gap is the difference between policy ideals and actual practices. There's a clear distinction between what's idealized in policies and what actually happens in



schools." Talal expressed this bluntly: "Current policies are theoretical and disconnected from the practical realities of schools."

Interpreted through Friedman's (2003) framework, these accounts reflect failures of coherence and accountability in policy implementation—deficits in the alignment between policy objectives, resource allocation, and administrative oversight. Contact theory (Allport, 1954) further contextualizes these findings: without clear guidance and institutional support, teachers lack the capacity to create the structured, meaningful interactions between students with and without disabilities that are essential for genuine social integration.

Superordinate Theme 2: Institutional and Administrative Support The second superordinate theme reveals that variability in administrative commitment, professional development provision, and resource access constituted a defining feature of teachers' experiences. Participants consistently reported administrative shortcomings and systemic gaps that impeded effective inclusion. Two subordinate themes emerged.

Inconsistency in School Leadership Support Five participants (Ahmed, Sara, Omer, Hamed, and Talal) described how inconsistent school leadership created significant barriers to inclusive practice. Sara's account was pointed: "Academic inclusion is weak. Unfortunately, this is due to the school principal's lack of understanding of special education policies and legislation." Ahmed linked weak administrative support directly to the burden placed on individual teachers: "Implementation is left entirely up to individual teachers due to insufficient training and resources."

Omer described how administrative fragmentation produced disjointed decision-making: "Policies state that decisions should be made by a multidisciplinary team, but in practice, specialists often make decisions alone." Hamed characterized current inclusion as aspirational rather than realized: "Inclusion in its current state is more of an idea than a reality. While the policies are promising, the implementation is lacking."

These findings align with Friedman's (2003) emphasis on coherence, accountability, and sustained leadership commitment as prerequisites for successful policy enactment. Inconsistent leadership represents the structural barrier that the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) identifies as fundamental to the failure of inclusive education—locating the problem not in teachers or students but in institutional structures that fail to support inclusion systematically.

Deficiencies in Professional Development Six participants described systematic deficiencies in professional development that left them ill-equipped to implement inclusive policies. Mohammed noted: "We don't have enough training or enough specialists." Ghaith identified the absence of structured support systems: "There is no collaborative support system for teachers to share practices or seek guidance." Sara highlighted how administrative misunderstanding compounded the problem of inadequate training, creating cascading failures at multiple levels of the educational system.

These accounts point to a systemic failure to invest in the human capital necessary for inclusion, consistent with research by Alnahdi et al. (2019) demonstrating that Saudi teachers broadly feel unprepared to support students with disabilities. The absence of sustained professional development represents what Friedman (2003) identifies as a fundamental prerequisite for effective policy implementation—and its absence perpetuates the reliance on individually focused, medically oriented approaches critiqued by the social model (Oliver, 1990).

Superordinate Theme 3: Instructional and Pedagogical Challenges The third superordinate theme captures the specific instructional difficulties teachers faced in implementing inclusive pedagogies. Participants identified persistent challenges in differentiated instruction, classroom management, and individualized education program (IEP) development and implementation. Two subordinate themes emerged.



Difficulties in Implementing Differentiated Instruction Four participants described significant difficulties with differentiated instruction. Omer reflected: "Differentiated instruction is something we hear about theoretically, but practically, it's challenging because we lack adequate resources and specific training. It's hard to differentiate when you have no clear guidance on how to address each student's needs." Sara emphasized the role of administrative misunderstanding: "We face considerable challenges with differentiated instruction. It is superficial because our leadership doesn't fully understand or support how we implement it practically in the classroom."

Ahmed described the practical effect: "Differentiation is ideal but complicated. Practically, it becomes nearly impossible due to the absence of consistent support and clear training. Without knowing precisely how to differentiate effectively, we struggle to integrate students successfully." Talal reinforced this: "We are expected to differentiate teaching without proper guidelines or practical training. It feels like we're guessing, and this negatively impacts classroom management and student engagement."

Contact theory (Allport, 1954) illuminates the significance of these findings: meaningful peer interactions require structured, intentional instructional strategies. When differentiation is superficial, the interactions between students with and without disabilities remain limited, preventing the conditions necessary for genuine social integration. These challenges underscore the need for practice-oriented professional development that equips teachers with concrete differentiation strategies.

Institutional Barriers to Developing and Implementing Effective IEPs Three participants (Ahmed, Ghaith, and Hamed) described systemic obstacles to effective IEP development and implementation. Ahmed illustrated how resource constraints forced generalized approaches: "For group plans, we group students with similar disabilities in one IEP. We consider their needs collectively, although the policy suggests that the plan should be individualized." Ghaith identified the breakdown of collaborative planning: "Theoretically, there should be a multidisciplinary team to develop individualized education programs. Practically, however, this team rarely meets. Usually, specialists make decisions without teacher input."

Hamed described the additional complication of family resistance: "Families often deny their child's condition and refuse the IEP. This makes it very challenging to implement individualized strategies effectively." He added: "We create individualized plans, but practically, fully implementing them is almost impossible due to weak administrative support and inadequate resources."

These accounts illustrate how the social model of disability's structural barriers manifest at the level of individual educational planning. Weak administrative frameworks, insufficient collaboration mechanisms, and resource scarcity collectively undermine the IEP process, limiting teachers' ability to provide the individualized support that inclusive education requires.

Superordinate Theme 4: Social and Psychological Dimensions of Inclusion The fourth superordinate theme encompasses teachers' perceptions of the social and psychological challenges faced by students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Participants consistently identified social isolation, superficial peer interactions, societal stigma, and inadequate psychological support as critical dimensions of students' inclusive experiences. Three subordinate themes emerged.

Social Isolation and Superficial Peer Interaction Six participants described patterns of social isolation and limited peer integration for students with disabilities. Mohammed observed that social interaction between students with and without disabilities was largely confined to recess—"the only place where students interact freely"—rather than being embedded in structured classroom activities. Ghaith noted that inclusion was often superficial: "Students with disabilities attend regular classrooms but often lack true social integration."

Sara linked superficial inclusion to the absence of structured social support: without intentional programs to facilitate peer relationships, students with disabilities remained peripheral members of their classroom



communities. These observations are consistent with contact theory (Allport, 1954), which holds that incidental, unstructured contact is insufficient to produce positive intergroup relations. Meaningful integration requires contact that is sustained, cooperative, and supported by institutional authority.

Societal Stigma and Attitudes Toward Disability Five participants identified negative societal attitudes and stigma as significant barriers to inclusion. Ahmed described how students without disabilities often avoided or marginalized their peers with disabilities. Hamed noted that societal attitudes toward disability in Saudi Arabia had not fully shifted to reflect the social model's emphasis on equal participation, with disability still frequently perceived through a deficit or medical lens.

These findings align with research by Gibbs and Bozaid (2022) and Hopkins et al. (2018), which documents the role of societal attitudes in shaping the quality of inclusive experiences. Contact theory (Allport, 1954) suggests that structured educational interventions can modify these attitudes over time, but only when the conditions for meaningful contact are systematically established.

Psychological and Emotional Needs Four participants described the psychological and emotional impacts of inadequate social integration on students with disabilities. Omer observed that students often felt frustrated and disengaged due to limited peer acceptance. Sara noted elevated anxiety and reduced self-esteem among students who experienced consistent social marginalization. Hamed emphasized that psychological support services were largely absent from schools, leaving teachers to manage complex emotional needs without specialized resources.

These findings resonate with Alfawzan and Almulhim (2024) and Alshenaifi (2018), who document the inadequacy of psychological support services in Saudi inclusive settings. From the social model perspective (Oliver, 1990), psychological distress among students with disabilities represents a consequence of environmental barriers—inadequate social structures, insufficient support systems, and negative attitudes—rather than an inherent feature of disability.

Discussion:

The findings of this study paint a detailed picture of the challenges confronting special education teachers implementing inclusion policies in Riyadh elementary schools. Across four superordinate themes, a consistent pattern emerges: policy ambitions for inclusive education are substantial, but the institutional, pedagogical, and social conditions necessary for their realization remain insufficiently developed. This discussion situates findings within the broader literature and theoretical frameworks, before turning to conclusions and recommendations.

Policy Ambiguity and Implementation Gaps The pervasive ambiguity in policy interpretation documented in this study reflects a systemic failure in policy communication that has been identified in international research on educational reform (Friedman, 2003; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). When teachers must rely on individual initiative rather than clear institutional guidance, the implementation of complex practices like inclusive education becomes inconsistent and unreliable. These findings extend the work of Alfawzan and Almulhim (2024) and Gibbs and Bozaid (2022), who identified policy ambiguity as a defining barrier in the Saudi context, by revealing the experiential texture of this ambiguity from teachers' perspectives.

The disconnect between policy ideals and classroom realities is not unique to Saudi Arabia—it is a well-documented feature of inclusion policy implementation globally (Boyle et al., 2013; Chiner & Cardona, 2013). What distinguishes the Saudi context is the combination of rapid legislative development and relatively limited infrastructure for translating policy into practice, producing a situation in which policies articulate ambitious inclusion goals while the systems necessary for achieving them remain underdeveloped.

Institutional and Professional Support Deficiencies The institutional support deficiencies documented in this study—inconsistent leadership, inadequate professional development, and insufficient resources—represent what Friedman (2003) identifies as the critical infrastructure of policy implementation. Without these elements, even well-



designed policies cannot achieve their intended outcomes. The finding that teachers frequently felt unsupported and isolated in their inclusion efforts echoes research by Alnahdi et al. (2019), who found widespread feelings of unpreparedness among Saudi teachers.

From the social model perspective (Oliver, 1990), these institutional deficiencies constitute the structural barriers that prevent genuine inclusion—they are not limitations of individual teachers but systemic failures of the educational system to provide the conditions that inclusive practice requires. Addressing them requires systemic reform: investment in professional development, strengthening of administrative capacity, and equitable resource allocation across schools.

Instructional Challenges and the Theory-Practice Gap Teachers' accounts of struggling to implement differentiated instruction and effective IEPs reveal a theory-practice gap that is central to the challenge of inclusion. Abstract policy mandates for individualized, differentiated education cannot translate into practice without concrete professional learning, collaborative planning time, and adequate resources. The tendency to use group IEPs, noted by Ahmed, represents a practical adaptation to resource constraints that undermines the individualization that inclusion requires.

These instructional challenges are consistent with Gibbs and Bozaid's (2021) findings and underscore the importance of practice-oriented professional development. The implications for contact theory (Allport, 1954) are significant: without effective differentiated instruction, the structured, cooperative contact conditions necessary for positive peer integration cannot be established.

Social and Psychological Dimensions The social isolation and psychological distress documented in this study highlight a dimension of inclusion that goes beyond academic access. Students with disabilities who are physically present in general education classrooms but socially peripheral—as described by multiple participants—are not truly included. This distinction between integration and inclusion has been emphasized throughout the theoretical literature (Thomas, 1997), and the findings confirm that Saudi schools have yet to bridge this gap.

Contact theory (Allport, 1954) provides the clearest framework for understanding how this gap might be addressed: through structured social programs, cooperative learning activities, and intentional pedagogical design that creates the conditions for meaningful peer relationships. The near-absence of psychological support services in the schools studied compounds these challenges, leaving students' emotional needs unaddressed.

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that Saudi Arabia's inclusive education system faces systemic challenges at the levels of policy communication, institutional support, pedagogical practice, and social integration. The findings yield several actionable conclusions and recommendations for policymakers, educational leaders, and practitioners.

Clarify and Operationalize Inclusion Policies The Saudi Ministry of Education should develop explicit, comprehensive, and action-oriented policy guidelines that translate inclusion mandates into concrete, step-by-step directives for classroom implementation. These guidelines should address the specific scenarios that teachers encounter—student placement, IEP development, classroom management, differentiated instruction—and should be communicated through regional training programs that include case studies, simulations, and practical walkthroughs. School leaders should receive detailed policy manuals to ensure consistent institutional guidance.

Invest in Sustained Professional Development Institutional investment in regular, structured professional development is essential. Training programs should be practice-oriented, incorporating hands-on strategies for differentiated instruction, IEP implementation, and inclusive classroom management. Integrating these modules into mandatory in-service training administered by the Ministry, supplemented by on-site collaborative workshops and mentorship from experienced special education practitioners, would provide contextually relevant learning that teachers can apply immediately. Administrative training should include modules specifically designed to strengthen leaders' understanding of and commitment to inclusive education.



Strengthen Institutional and Administrative Support Effective inclusion requires coherent, committed administrative support at the school level. Leadership development should prepare principals and administrators to understand special education policies and to champion inclusive practices actively. Multidisciplinary teams—including teachers, specialists, counselors, and administrators—should be established and empowered to collaborate in student placement and IEP processes, ensuring that the collaborative decision-making mandated by policy becomes standard practice. Funding for these initiatives could be drawn from existing Ministry budgets aligned with Vision 2030 priorities, with decentralized allocation enabling regional offices to address local needs.

Address Social and Psychological Dimensions of Inclusion Schools should establish formal social integration programs designed to foster meaningful peer relationships between students with and without disabilities, consistent with the principles of contact theory (Allport, 1954). These programs should incorporate cooperative learning activities, social skills training, and structured peer interaction opportunities that create the conditions for positive intergroup relations. Every school should have trained counselors or psychologists who collaborate with teachers to support students' emotional well-being and facilitate social integration. Teacher training should incorporate evidence-based strategies for addressing the psychological and emotional needs of students with disabilities.

Transition Toward an Integrated Inclusion Model The study's findings underscore the urgent need to move beyond a fragmented, medically oriented approach toward an integrated framework that synthesizes the social model's emphasis on structural reform with individualized supports. Policymakers should adopt a hybrid inclusion framework that prioritizes both personalized interventions (through IEPs and individualized accommodations) and systemic structural adjustments (such as flexible scheduling, co-teaching models, accessible classroom design, and universal design for learning). Ministry-led audits and accountability measures should be established to monitor and document schools' progress toward inclusion goals, ensuring sustained and measurable advancement.

Limitations and Future Research Several limitations frame the scope and implications of this study. The sample comprised seven teachers from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's administrative center, and findings may not represent experiences in less resourced or more peripheral regions of the Kingdom. The exclusive use of semi-structured interviews—while well-suited to IPA—precluded the triangulation that classroom observations, policy document analysis, or field notes could have provided. Saudi Arabia's hierarchical educational culture and norms of deference to authority may have influenced participants' willingness to share fully candid assessments, introducing the possibility of social desirability bias.

Future research should extend this inquiry in several directions. Studies examining teachers' experiences across diverse Saudi regions would illuminate how geographic, institutional, and socioeconomic variation affects inclusion policy implementation. Mixed-methods designs incorporating classroom observation alongside interview data would provide richer triangulation. Research specifically focused on students' and families' perspectives would complement the teacher-centered focus of the present study. Longitudinal research examining how teachers' experiences evolve as institutional supports develop would also contribute important knowledge to this field.

Despite these limitations, the study makes an important contribution by providing a detailed, phenomenologically grounded account of special education teachers' lived experiences implementing inclusive education in Saudi Arabia. Its findings—integrated through three complementary theoretical frameworks—advance understanding of the systemic barriers that must be addressed to achieve the goal of genuine inclusive education for all students.

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