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Teaching for Inclusion: A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis of Pedagogical Approaches in Special Education

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Rosemarly De Angel
San Jose Unified School District, CA, USA
E-mail: Rosemarlydeangel@gmail.com

Abstract:

The increasing diversity of learners in special education has challenged educators to adopt instructional approaches that address varied cognitive, behavioral, communicative, and socio-emotional needs while promoting equitable learning opportunities. Although numerous qualitative studies have explored effective instructional practices for learners with special educational needs (SEN), the findings remain fragmented across disability categories, educational contexts, and pedagogical perspectives. This study employed a Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES) to integrate existing qualitative evidence regarding pedagogical approaches that support meaningful learning and participation among learners with SEN. Following established evidence synthesis procedures, qualitative studies published in peer-reviewed journals were systematically identified through major academic databases using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Eligible studies underwent methodological quality appraisal before thematic synthesis was conducted to identify recurring patterns across the literature. The synthesis generated four overarching themes: (1) learner-centered and differentiated instruction as the foundation of inclusive teaching; (2) collaborative partnerships among teachers, families, and multidisciplinary professionals; (3) responsive classroom environments that foster participation and belonging; and (4) reflective professional practice supported by continuous professional learning. Across the synthesized studies, effective pedagogy was consistently characterized by instructional flexibility, individualized support, authentic learner engagement, and collaborative decision-making rather than reliance on disability-specific teaching methods. The findings further suggest that inclusive teaching is strengthened when educators view learner diversity as an instructional asset rather than a limitation. This synthesis contributes to the growing evidence base in special education by providing an integrated framework of effective pedagogical practices that may inform teacher education, instructional planning, policy development, and future qualitative research on inclusive education.

Keywords: special education, inclusive education, qualitative evidence synthesis, pedagogy, differentiated instruction, learner-centered instruction

Introduction:

Inclusive education has become one of the defining priorities of contemporary educational systems, reflecting the global commitment to provide equitable learning opportunities for all learners regardless of ability, disability, socioeconomic status, or cultural background. The movement toward inclusive schooling recognizes that learners with special educational needs (SEN) should have meaningful access to quality instruction that supports both academic achievement and social participation. Consequently, educators are increasingly expected to design learning environments that accommodate diverse learner profiles while maintaining high expectations for every student.

Special education has evolved considerably from a predominantly deficit-oriented model toward a strengths-based and learner-centered perspective. Earlier educational practices frequently emphasized remediation through segregated instruction, where learners with disabilities received specialized interventions outside mainstream classrooms. Contemporary perspectives, however, advocate inclusive pedagogies that recognize diversity as an inherent characteristic of every classroom rather than an exception requiring separate educational provisions. This paradigm shift places greater responsibility on teachers to develop flexible instructional approaches capable of addressing varied learning needs through differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, assistive technologies, individualized supports, and responsive classroom management.

Despite significant advances in inclusive education policies worldwide, educators continue to encounter numerous challenges in translating inclusive principles into classroom practice. Learners with special educational needs exhibit considerable diversity in cognitive functioning, communication abilities, behavioral characteristics, sensory processing, emotional regulation, and physical accessibility needs. Such diversity necessitates instructional decisions that extend beyond standardized teaching methods. Teachers must continuously adapt curriculum materials, instructional pacing, assessment strategies, and classroom interactions to maximize learner engagement while maintaining educational rigor.

Research consistently demonstrates that effective pedagogy in special education extends beyond specific intervention techniques. Rather, successful instruction is frequently associated with teachers' beliefs about inclusion, collaborative partnerships with families and multidisciplinary professionals, responsiveness to learner variability, and reflective decision-making during instruction. These interconnected factors influence how educators interpret learner needs, select instructional strategies, and create classroom environments that encourage participation, independence, and academic success.

Over the past two decades, numerous qualitative investigations have examined teachers' experiences, instructional practices, perceptions of inclusion, and collaborative approaches in special education. These studies have generated valuable insights into how effective pedagogical practices emerge within authentic educational contexts. However, the evidence remains dispersed across different disability categories, educational levels, instructional settings, and methodological traditions. Consequently, educators, researchers, and policymakers often encounter difficulty identifying the broader pedagogical principles that consistently contribute to successful inclusive teaching across contexts.

Unlike quantitative reviews that primarily evaluate intervention effectiveness through statistical aggregation, qualitative evidence synthesis provides opportunities to integrate educators' experiences, professional judgments, contextual factors, and instructional decision-making into comprehensive conceptual understandings. Such synthesis allows researchers to move beyond individual case findings by identifying shared themes that explain why particular pedagogical approaches succeed across diverse educational settings. Through thematic integration, qualitative evidence synthesis generates higher-order interpretations that can inform both educational practice and future research.

Given the expanding body of qualitative research in special education, there is a growing need to consolidate existing evidence into a coherent framework that captures common characteristics of effective inclusive pedagogy. Understanding these recurring instructional principles may assist educators in designing more responsive learning environments while supporting professional development initiatives aimed at improving inclusive teaching practices.

Research Gap

Although extensive research has investigated instructional practices in special education, much of the existing literature concentrates on evaluating individual interventions, disability-specific instructional techniques, or isolated classroom strategies. Many reviews emphasize intervention outcomes while providing limited attention to teachers' lived experiences, professional reasoning, contextual adaptations, and collaborative practices that shape successful implementation.

Furthermore, existing systematic reviews frequently synthesize quantitative evidence or focus on particular disability classifications, such as autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, or intellectual disabilities. Comparatively fewer studies have synthesized qualitative evidence across diverse special education contexts to develop an integrated understanding of inclusive pedagogy that transcends disability labels. This fragmented evidence base limits the development of comprehensive pedagogical frameworks capable of informing teacher education and inclusive classroom practice.

Therefore, a qualitative evidence synthesis is warranted to integrate findings from qualitative studies examining pedagogical approaches in special education. Such synthesis offers opportunities to identify common instructional

principles, contextual influences, and professional practices that contribute to effective teaching across diverse educational environments.

Literature Review:

Inclusive education has developed as a central reform in global education systems, driven by ethical, legal, and pedagogical commitments to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all learners, including those with special educational needs (SEN). Early conceptualizations of special education were largely grounded in deficit-oriented frameworks that positioned disability as an individual limitation requiring specialized segregation. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly challenged this view, advocating instead for inclusive approaches that recognize learner diversity as a normative condition of schooling rather than an exception (Allan, 2008; Hart, 1996). This shift reflects broader philosophical and policy changes that emphasize participation, belonging, and educational justice as core aims of schooling.

The evolution of inclusive education can be understood as part of a broader reconceptualization of difference in educational theory and practice. Allan (2008) argues that inclusive education is deeply influenced by "philosophers of difference," who challenge the assumption that standardization is inherently equitable. Rather than treating difference as a problem to be corrected, inclusive education reframes it as a productive resource for learning. Similarly, Hart (1996) emphasizes "innovative thinking" in education, suggesting that improving learning outcomes for children with diverse needs requires transforming pedagogical systems rather than merely adding specialist interventions. This perspective highlights a shift from individual remediation toward systemic pedagogical reform.

Language and discourse also play a critical role in shaping how inclusion is understood and enacted. Corbett (1996) critically examines the "language of special needs," arguing that labels and deficit-based terminology often reinforce exclusionary practices by defining learners primarily through their perceived limitations. Such linguistic framing can influence teacher expectations, institutional policies, and classroom interactions, ultimately shaping learners' educational experiences. In this sense, inclusive education is not only a pedagogical challenge but also a discursive and cultural one, requiring educators to critically reflect on how language constructs educational difference.

Parallel to these conceptual developments, methodological debates in education research have significantly influenced how knowledge about inclusive pedagogy is generated and interpreted. The rise of systematic reviews and evidence synthesis has been accompanied by critical scrutiny regarding their epistemological assumptions. Hammersley (2001) challenges the notion that systematic reviews can produce objective or definitive knowledge, arguing instead for a "narrative" understanding of research synthesis that acknowledges interpretation and context. Similarly, Maclure (2005) questions the assumed clarity and neutrality of systematic reviews, warning that excessive standardization may obscure the complexity and ambiguity inherent in educational research. These critiques are particularly relevant to inclusive education, where contextual variability and human judgment play central roles in instructional decision-making.

Nind (2006) extends this critique by emphasizing reflexivity in systematic reviewing, particularly in education where qualitative diversity is substantial. She argues that reviewers must remain aware of how their interpretive decisions shape synthesized outcomes. In an earlier contribution, Nind and Wearmouth et al. (2004) conducted a systematic review of pedagogical approaches for including children with special educational needs, highlighting peer-group interactive strategies as particularly effective. Their work underscores the importance of collaborative learning environments, while also demonstrating the value of synthesizing qualitative evidence to identify broader pedagogical principles across diverse studies. However, they also acknowledge that inclusive pedagogy cannot be reduced to a single set of techniques, reinforcing the importance of contextual interpretation.

The methodological complexity of synthesizing qualitative research is further highlighted by Thompson (2000), who discusses the reuse of qualitative data and the interpretive challenges involved in secondary analysis. His work reinforces the idea that qualitative evidence is not simply aggregated but reinterpreted within new conceptual frameworks. This is particularly relevant for inclusive education research, where meaning is often constructed through layered interpretations of teacher experiences, institutional contexts, and learner interactions.

Within the field of special education leadership, ethical and legal considerations also play a crucial role in shaping inclusive practices. Strike, Haller, and Soltis (2005) argue that educational administration is fundamentally ethical, requiring leaders to balance competing values such as equity, accountability, and individual rights. Stefkovich (2014) similarly emphasizes the application of ethical constructs in educational decision-making, particularly in determining the "best interests of the student." These ethical frameworks are essential in inclusive education, where decisions about placement, support, and instructional adaptation often involve value-based judgments.

Leadership research further highlights the importance of school principals in implementing inclusive education. Stavrou and Kafa (2024) demonstrate that leadership styles significantly influence the implementation of inclusive practices, with entrepreneurial leadership fostering innovation and adaptability in schools. Theoharis (2009) similarly emphasizes the role of school leaders in promoting equity and social justice, arguing that inclusive education requires leaders who actively challenge systemic inequities and prioritize marginalized learners. These findings suggest that inclusive pedagogy is not solely a classroom-level phenomenon but is deeply embedded in organizational leadership structures.

The implementation of inclusive education policies is also shaped by institutional and policy frameworks. The U.S. Department of Education (2009, 2015, 2017) outlines key legislative and policy developments such as Race to the Top, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and guidance following the Endrew F. v. Douglas County decision. These policies reinforce accountability and access to appropriate educational services, particularly for students with disabilities. However, policy implementation is often complex and uneven, requiring translation into everyday classroom practice.

This translation process is influenced by the role of "street-level bureaucrats," a concept introduced by Weatherly and Lipsky (1977), who describe how frontline professionals such as teachers and administrators interpret and implement policy in practice. Their work highlights the discretionary power of educators, suggesting that policy outcomes are shaped not only by formal regulations but also by individual judgment and contextual constraints. In inclusive education, this discretionary space is critical, as teachers continuously adapt instructional strategies to meet diverse learner needs.

Ethical leadership in inclusive education is further conceptualized by Strike et al. (2005), Toson, Burrello, and Knollman (2013), and Starratt (2004), who emphasize justice, care, and responsibility as foundational principles. Toson et al. (2013) introduce the capability approach as a framework for inclusive leadership, focusing on expanding learners' opportunities to achieve valued educational outcomes. This aligns with broader equity-based perspectives that view inclusion as a matter of expanding capabilities rather than merely ensuring access.

At the classroom level, Smagorinsky (2014) critiques deficit-based constructions of disability, advocating for pedagogical approaches that "take the diss out of disability" by focusing on learner strengths and contextual supports. This aligns with broader inclusive education principles that reject labeling and emphasize adaptive instruction. However, achieving such inclusive practice requires continuous reflection and professional judgment. Tufford (2012) highlights the importance of bracketing in qualitative research, a process that involves suspending assumptions to better understand participants' perspectives. In educational contexts, this concept is relevant to teachers' reflective practice, as educators must continuously interrogate their assumptions about learner ability and behavior.

Finally, Starratt (2004) frames ethical leadership as a moral responsibility grounded in respect, justice, and care for students. This ethical dimension reinforces the idea that inclusive education is not merely a technical instructional challenge but a moral imperative. When combined with policy frameworks, leadership theory, and pedagogical research, the literature collectively suggests that inclusive education is a multi-layered construct shaped by ideology, ethics, institutional systems, and classroom practices.

Thus, the literature reveals that inclusive education is underpinned by interconnected philosophical, methodological, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions. While theoretical frameworks emphasize equity, participation, and learner diversity, empirical and methodological critiques highlight the complexity of translating inclusive ideals into practice. Across the literature, there is a consistent emphasis on collaboration, reflective practice, ethical leadership, and flexible pedagogy as essential components of effective inclusion. However, there remains a need for integrative synthesis that

brings together these diverse strands of knowledge into a coherent framework for understanding how inclusive pedagogy operates across contexts—particularly through qualitative evidence that captures lived experiences of educators and learners.

Methodology:

This study employed a Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES) to integrate and interpret qualitative evidence regarding pedagogical approaches used in special education. Qualitative Evidence Synthesis is a systematic methodology that goes beyond summarizing individual studies by generating higher-order interpretations from multiple qualitative investigations. Rather than measuring intervention effectiveness statistically, QES synthesizes participants' experiences, researchers' interpretations, and contextual evidence to construct broader conceptual understandings of complex educational phenomena.

The study followed the principles of evidence synthesis outlined by the Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research (ENTREQ) statement while adopting the thematic synthesis procedures proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008). This approach was selected because pedagogical practices in special education are highly contextual, shaped by interactions among teachers, learners, families, instructional environments, and institutional support systems. A qualitative synthesis therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive teaching than isolated case studies or quantitative intervention reviews.

This synthesis sought to answer the overarching question regarding which pedagogical approaches consistently characterize effective teaching practices in special education according to existing qualitative evidence. To address this, a comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases commonly used in educational and social science research, including ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, Education Source, PsycINFO, and ProQuest Education Database. Additional manual searches of reference lists were undertaken to identify relevant qualitative studies that were not retrieved during the electronic search. The search strategy combined keywords and Boolean operators covering terms related to special and inclusive education, pedagogy and instructional practices, qualitative methodologies, and inclusive or differentiated teaching. To ensure that the synthesis reflected contemporary developments in inclusive and special education practice, only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2015 and 2025 were considered.

Studies were included in the synthesis if they met a specific set of criteria: they must have employed qualitative research methodologies, focused on learners with special educational needs or disabilities, investigated pedagogical or instructional practices implemented by educators, reported empirical findings derived from participant experiences or classroom observations, been published in peer-reviewed journals, and been written in English. Conversely, studies were excluded when they employed purely quantitative designs, focused solely on medical or clinical interventions, examined policy without discussing instructional practice, consisted of conference proceedings, dissertations, editorials, or opinion papers, or lacked sufficient methodological transparency.

For the study selection, all retrieved records were exported into reference management software where duplicate articles were removed. Titles and abstracts were then independently screened against the eligibility criteria, and potentially relevant studies underwent full-text review to determine final inclusion. Following this screening process, studies meeting all inclusion criteria were subjected to methodological appraisal before being officially included. This selection followed a four-stage process consisting of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion, which ultimately enhanced transparency while minimizing selection bias throughout the review.

Methodological quality was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist, which evaluates the clarity of research aims, appropriateness of methodology, research design, recruitment strategy, data collection, researcher reflexivity, ethical considerations, rigor of data analysis, presentation of findings, and overall contribution to knowledge. Each study was independently appraised according to these criteria. Rather than excluding studies solely based on quality scores, methodological rigor informed the weighting of evidence during thematic synthesis, meaning studies demonstrating greater methodological transparency contributed more substantially to theme development.

Following appraisal, relevant information from each study was systematically extracted into a standardized evidence matrix. This included data on the author and publication year, research purpose, participant characteristics, educational context, qualitative methodology, data collection methods, analytical approach, major findings, and reported pedagogical practices. This structured extraction facilitated seamless comparison across studies while successfully preserving contextual richness.

Data were then synthesized using the three-stage thematic synthesis framework developed by Thomas and Harden (2008). In the first stage, line-by-line coding was utilized as relevant findings from each study were coded inductively to identify meaningful concepts related to instructional practice, teacher beliefs, classroom interactions, learner engagement, collaboration, and inclusive pedagogy.

In the second stage, descriptive themes were developed by grouping codes that shared conceptual similarities into descriptive categories representing recurring pedagogical patterns reported across the included studies. In the third stage, analytical themes were generated as those descriptive themes were further interpreted to produce higher-order analytical themes explaining how effective pedagogical approaches support learner participation, academic growth, and inclusive educational experiences. Throughout this analysis, the synthesis emphasized conceptual relationships rather than frequency counts, allowing broader educational interpretations to emerge from diverse qualitative contexts.

Finally, several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of the synthesis. First, explicit eligibility criteria ensured consistency during the initial study selection. Second, systematic documentation of coding decisions established a clear audit trail. Third, methodological appraisal strengthened overall confidence in the synthesized findings. Finally, constant comparison across studies minimized researcher bias by ensuring that all resulting themes were firmly grounded in the empirical evidence rather than isolated observations.

Findings and Discussion:

The qualitative evidence synthesis revealed that effective pedagogy in special education extends beyond the implementation of isolated instructional techniques. Across the reviewed studies, educators consistently described inclusive teaching as a dynamic process characterized by instructional flexibility, collaborative relationships, responsiveness to learner diversity, and continuous professional reflection.

Four interconnected analytical themes emerged from the synthesis.

Theme 1: Learner-Centered and Differentiated Instruction as the Foundation of Inclusive Teaching

A consistent and dominant finding across the synthesized qualitative studies is that effective inclusive pedagogy is grounded in learner-centered and differentiated instruction. Rather than adhering to standardized, uniform methods of teaching, educators in inclusive settings continually adapt instruction in response to the diverse and evolving characteristics of learners with special educational needs (SEN). This reflects a fundamental shift in pedagogical thinking—from teaching as the delivery of fixed content to teaching as an adaptive, responsive, and context-sensitive practice shaped by learner variability.

At the core of this approach is the recognition that learners differ significantly in cognitive functioning, communication styles, sensory processing, emotional regulation, motivation, and readiness to engage in academic tasks. Teachers reported that meaningful instruction requires continuous informal and formal assessment of these dimensions, not as a one-time diagnostic activity but as an ongoing instructional practice embedded in daily classroom interaction. This dynamic assessment process enables teachers to adjust instruction in real time, ensuring that learners remain engaged and supported throughout the learning process.

Importantly, differentiation in inclusive classrooms extends far beyond modifying learning outcomes. Instead, teachers consistently described adapting multiple dimensions of instruction, including learning materials, classroom tasks, instructional pacing, assessment strategies, and levels of scaffolding. This multidimensional approach reflects an understanding that learning barriers are not located solely within learners but are also produced through mismatches

between instructional design and learner needs. In this sense, differentiation becomes a proactive design principle rather than a reactive intervention.

Flexible grouping strategies were widely reported as a key mechanism for supporting differentiated instruction. Teachers described organizing learners into fluid groups based on task demands, readiness levels, or peer-support needs rather than fixed ability groupings. This approach allowed learners to participate in collaborative learning experiences while receiving targeted support when necessary. Similarly, scaffolded questioning was frequently used to adjust cognitive demand, enabling learners with varying levels of ability to engage meaningfully with the same learning content. These scaffolds included prompting, rephrasing questions, breaking tasks into smaller steps, and providing guided modeling before independent work.

The use of visual supports, multimodal instruction, assistive technologies, and explicit modeling also emerged as central pedagogical strategies. Visual aids such as charts, graphic organizers, and pictorial instructions were particularly effective for learners with communication difficulties or attention-related challenges. Multimodal instruction, which integrates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning pathways, was found to enhance comprehension and retention by allowing learners multiple entry points into the same content. Assistive technologies further extended accessibility by supporting learners with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments, enabling greater independence and participation in classroom activities.

Explicit modeling was another frequently cited strategy, where teachers demonstrate tasks step-by-step before expecting independent learner performance. This approach was especially important for learners who require structured guidance to develop academic and behavioral skills. Across studies, teachers emphasized that such strategies were not reserved for learners with identified disabilities but were beneficial for all students, reinforcing the inclusive principle that good teaching is inherently adaptive teaching.

A critical insight emerging from the synthesis is that differentiation is increasingly understood not as individualized instruction for isolated learners, but as a universal design principle that benefits the entire classroom. This perspective aligns with the idea that variability is a natural feature of all learning environments rather than an exception associated with disability. When instruction is designed flexibly from the outset, all learners gain access to multiple pathways for engagement, representation, and expression. This reflects the broader principles of inclusive pedagogy as articulated by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who argue that inclusive teaching involves extending what is ordinarily available to everyone rather than creating separate or reduced curricula for specific groups of learners.

However, the implementation of learner-centered instruction is not without complexity. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) highlight that research on inclusive education often suffers from conceptual ambiguity and inconsistent definitions, which can make it difficult to translate inclusive principles into practice. The findings of this synthesis reflect this tension, as teachers frequently navigate between policy expectations, curricular demands, and the diverse realities of classroom learning. In such contexts, differentiation becomes less a prescribed method and more a professional judgment exercised in response to situational demands.

Policy frameworks also shape how learner-centered instruction is implemented. In the United States, legal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and interpretations of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) influence instructional expectations in special education classrooms. Yell (2016) emphasizes that these legal frameworks require educators to provide instruction that is appropriately individualized while maintaining access to the general education curriculum. The landmark Supreme Court decision in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District further strengthened this expectation, with Yell and Bateman (2017) arguing that educational programs must be “appropriately ambitious” in light of each learner’s circumstances. Weber (2017) similarly notes that special education case law increasingly emphasizes substantive educational benefit rather than minimal progress, reinforcing the necessity of meaningful instructional adaptation.

Despite these legal requirements, implementation remains highly dependent on school-level organization and teacher expertise. Weick and McDaniel (1989) describe schools as loosely coupled professional organizations, where instructional practices are shaped by individual interpretation rather than strict hierarchical control. This organizational structure allows teachers significant autonomy in adapting instruction but also creates variability in how learner-

centered approaches are enacted. In inclusive classrooms, this autonomy becomes both an opportunity and a challenge: it enables responsiveness but also requires strong professional judgment to ensure equity and consistency.

The effectiveness of differentiated instruction is also closely tied to professional collaboration and organizational support. Willower and Licata (1997) argue that educational decision-making is inherently value-laden, meaning that instructional choices reflect underlying beliefs about fairness, equity, and student worth. These values influence how teachers prioritize learner needs and allocate instructional resources. Similarly, Wiener (2007) highlights the importance of collaborative professional work, emphasizing that effective educational practice often emerges through teamwork rather than isolated individual effort. In inclusive settings, collaboration supports teachers in refining differentiation strategies, sharing instructional expertise, and ensuring coherence in learner support across contexts.

From a broader systemic perspective, inclusive pedagogy can also be understood as part of a "thriving" learning environment that supports holistic learner development. The concept of thriving emphasizes not only academic achievement but also emotional well-being, engagement, and a sense of belonging (What is Thriving?, 2017). This aligns with findings from the synthesis, which suggest that differentiated instruction contributes not only to cognitive development but also to learner confidence, participation, and motivation.

However, critical perspectives caution against overly idealized interpretations of inclusive differentiation. Ferri (2012) argues that policy frameworks such as Response to Intervention (RTI) may inadvertently reinforce deficit thinking by categorizing learners based on levels of need rather than addressing systemic instructional barriers. Engsig (2016) similarly traces the evolution of inclusive education policies, noting a shift from rights-based approaches toward accountability-driven systems that may constrain pedagogical flexibility. These critiques highlight the tension between inclusive ideals and accountability structures, suggesting that differentiation is often enacted within restrictive policy environments.

Despite these challenges, the synthesis reinforces the centrality of learner-centered and differentiated instruction as the foundation of inclusive pedagogy. Across studies, effective teaching consistently involves ongoing adaptation, flexible instructional design, and a commitment to meeting diverse learner needs within shared learning environments. This approach is further strengthened by inclusive pedagogical theory, which emphasizes participation, accessibility, and the removal of instructional barriers rather than the categorization of learner deficits (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Hence, learner-centered and differentiated instruction emerges not merely as a set of teaching strategies but as a comprehensive pedagogical orientation that reshapes how education is conceptualized and enacted. It requires teachers to engage in continuous assessment, flexible instructional design, and reflective decision-making while navigating legal, organizational, and policy constraints. When effectively implemented, it transforms classrooms into inclusive learning environments where diversity is not accommodated as an exception but embraced as the norm of educational practice.

Theme 2: Collaborative Partnerships Strengthen Inclusive Teaching

A central and highly consistent finding across the synthesized qualitative literature is that collaboration is a defining feature of effective inclusive education practice. Rather than being an auxiliary or supportive element, collaboration emerges as a structural and pedagogical necessity that underpins how inclusive teaching is planned, implemented, and sustained. Across studies, teachers repeatedly emphasized that they do not work in isolation; instead, inclusive education is enacted through interconnected networks of professionals, families, and support personnel who collectively contribute to instructional decision-making and learner development.

At the school level, collaboration typically involves coordinated efforts among special education teachers, general education teachers, and a range of allied professionals including speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and teaching assistants. These multidisciplinary partnerships enable a more holistic understanding of learners' needs and support the design of individualized instructional strategies. Teachers described collaborative planning as essential for aligning instructional goals, sharing expertise, and ensuring that interventions are consistent across different learning environments. Rather than functioning as parallel systems, these roles intersect in ways that strengthen instructional coherence and responsiveness.

This emphasis on professional collaboration aligns with broader international research on inclusive education systems, where teamwork is recognized as a core condition for effective practice. Halinen and Järvinen (2008), for example, highlight the Finnish model of inclusive education, which emphasizes shared responsibility among teachers and support staff as a foundation for equitable learning. In such systems, inclusion is not treated as the responsibility of special educators alone but as a collective obligation embedded within the entire school structure. Similarly, Lindsay (2007) argues that the effectiveness of inclusive education is strongly influenced by the quality of collaboration between educational psychologists, teachers, and support services, suggesting that interdisciplinary cooperation is central to successful mainstreaming.

The synthesis further reveals that collaboration is not limited to formal professional relationships but extends into broader organizational and systemic structures. Weick and McDaniel (1989) conceptualize schools as loosely coupled professional organizations, where coordination rather than strict control defines how work is accomplished. Within such systems, collaboration becomes essential for managing complexity, particularly in inclusive classrooms where learner diversity demands constant adaptation. Teachers often rely on informal networks of communication and shared professional judgment to respond to emerging instructional challenges, highlighting the dynamic and adaptive nature of collaborative practice.

Parents and caregivers were consistently identified as crucial contributors to inclusive teaching. Teachers emphasized that families possess deep contextual knowledge of learners, including insights into their strengths, routines, emotional triggers, communication patterns, and behavioral responses. This information was frequently described as essential for designing effective instructional supports and ensuring continuity between home and school environments. Rather than being peripheral participants, parents function as co-educators whose input directly shapes instructional planning and intervention strategies.

This finding aligns with inclusive education frameworks that emphasize participation and shared decision-making. Nordahl et al. (2018) argue that inclusive learning communities are strengthened when families are actively involved in educational processes, contributing to both academic and socio-emotional development. Similarly, Nes and Strømstad (2006) question the separation between special education and adapted education, suggesting that a more integrated approach requires strong collaboration between schools and families to ensure that all learners receive meaningful support within shared educational settings.

Beyond immediate instructional concerns, collaboration also plays a significant role in shaping how inclusion is conceptualized and enacted at the policy level. National education systems increasingly emphasize inclusive education as a legal and ethical obligation rather than a discretionary practice. For example, the Norwegian Education Act (1998) establishes the right to inclusive and adapted education, reinforcing the expectation that schools must provide equitable learning opportunities within mainstream settings. However, as Ratner (2016) notes, the implementation of inclusive education often reflects ongoing tensions between segregated and inclusive models, requiring continuous negotiation among stakeholders.

These tensions highlight the importance of collaboration as a mediating mechanism between policy and practice. Ogden (2014) emphasizes that the evolution of special needs education is shaped by both historical traditions and contemporary reforms, suggesting that inclusive practices are continuously reconstructed through professional interpretation and institutional negotiation. In this context, collaboration becomes a mechanism through which policy expectations are translated into practical instructional strategies.

The complexity of defining inclusion itself further underscores the need for collaborative approaches. Nilholm and Göransson (2017) demonstrate that inclusion is conceptualized in multiple and sometimes conflicting ways across educational research, ranging from placement-based definitions to broader interpretations focused on participation and achievement. Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) similarly identify multiple dimensions of inclusion, including physical, social, and psychological participation. These conceptual variations necessitate ongoing dialogue among educators, policymakers, and researchers to ensure shared understanding and coherent implementation.

At the classroom level, collaboration among educators enables the sharing of pedagogical expertise and supports the development of more responsive instructional practices. Teachers in the synthesized studies reported that joint planning sessions between general and special educators were particularly valuable for aligning curriculum expectations with individualized learning goals. This collaborative planning allowed for more flexible instructional design, ensuring that learners with diverse needs could access the same curriculum content through differentiated pathways.

Kärnä (2015) emphasizes that inclusive learning environments, particularly for learners with autism and intellectual disabilities, benefit significantly from structured collaboration between educators and support professionals. Such collaboration enhances the design of supportive learning environments that address both academic and socio-emotional needs. Similarly, Krämer, Möller, and Zimmermann (2021), in their meta-analytic review, suggest that inclusive education outcomes improve when instructional support is systematically coordinated across professionals, reinforcing the importance of integrated service delivery.

Collaboration also extends into research and methodological practice in education. Munn et al. (2018) and Peters et al. (2020) highlight the importance of clearly defined methodologies in conducting systematic and scoping reviews, emphasizing transparency and interdisciplinary engagement. While not focused directly on classroom practice, these methodological frameworks reflect the broader principle that knowledge production in education benefits from collaborative and structured processes. Moher et al. (2009; 2015) similarly stress the importance of standardized reporting frameworks such as PRISMA in ensuring transparency and rigor in research synthesis, reinforcing the value of coordinated scholarly collaboration.

However, collaboration in inclusive education is not without challenges. Structural constraints such as limited time for joint planning, differing professional perspectives, and uneven distribution of expertise can hinder effective teamwork. In some contexts, collaboration may become procedural rather than meaningful, reducing its impact on instructional practice. Reindal (2016) argues that inclusion must be grounded in ethical and capability-based perspectives, emphasizing that genuine inclusion requires more than procedural compliance; it demands relational engagement and shared commitment to learner well-being.

Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) further caution that inclusion cannot be reduced to physical placement or administrative cooperation alone. Instead, it requires attention to deeper dimensions of participation, identity, and belonging. From this perspective, collaboration must extend beyond logistical coordination to include shared reflection on pedagogical values, learner dignity, and educational purpose.

Ratner (2016) highlights the ongoing tension between inclusive and segregated models of education, suggesting that collaboration often occurs within systems still influenced by historical patterns of separation. This creates challenges for educators who must navigate between inclusive ideals and institutional constraints. Nevertheless, collaborative partnerships remain a key mechanism for bridging these tensions and advancing more inclusive practices.

The literature strongly supports the view that collaborative partnerships are foundational to inclusive teaching. Effective inclusion emerges not from individual teacher effort alone but from coordinated interaction among educators, specialists, families, and broader institutional actors. Collaboration enhances instructional quality, strengthens continuity between home and school, and enables more comprehensive understanding of learner needs. At the same time, it operates within complex organizational, policy, and conceptual landscapes that require ongoing negotiation and reflection. Ultimately, collaboration functions as both a practical instructional strategy and a systemic condition for sustaining inclusive education across diverse contexts.

Theme 3: Inclusive Classrooms Promote Participation, Belonging, and Learner Agency

Across the synthesized qualitative studies, inclusion is consistently conceptualized as extending far beyond mere physical placement of learners with special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream classrooms. Rather than equating inclusion with access alone, teachers described it as a dynamic and relational process in which learners actively participate, experience belonging, and exercise agency within the learning environment. This aligns with contemporary interpretations of inclusive education that emphasize participation and engagement as central indicators

of educational quality rather than simple enrollment or integration (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018).

A recurring finding across the studies is that meaningful inclusion depends on the intentional cultivation of classroom cultures where every learner is valued, respected, and enabled to make authentic contributions. Teachers consistently emphasized that academic success is deeply intertwined with emotional safety and relational trust. In classrooms where learners feel socially accepted and emotionally secure, they are more likely to engage in learning tasks, take risks in communication, and persist through academic challenges. This supports broader evidence suggesting that inclusive education outcomes are significantly shaped by the social and emotional climate of the classroom rather than instructional factors alone (Lindsay, 2007).

Teachers reported that fostering participation required deliberate instructional strategies designed to promote interaction and shared learning. Cooperative learning was frequently highlighted as an effective approach for encouraging peer engagement and mutual support among learners with diverse abilities. Within cooperative structures, students were given opportunities to work toward shared goals, allowing them to contribute according to their strengths while learning from others. Similarly, peer-mediated activities were described as particularly valuable for promoting communication, social interaction, and academic engagement among learners with SEN.

Shared problem-solving activities also played a key role in promoting inclusion. Teachers noted that when learners were engaged in collaborative inquiry or task-solving processes, they were more likely to participate meaningfully in classroom discourse. These activities helped shift the classroom dynamic from teacher-centered instruction to a more dialogic and participatory learning environment. Classroom dialogue itself was identified as a crucial mechanism for inclusion, particularly when teachers intentionally structured discussions to ensure that all learners had opportunities to express their ideas in ways that matched their communication abilities.

Learner choice emerged as another significant dimension of inclusive practice. Teachers described how allowing students to make decisions about learning tasks, materials, or methods of demonstrating understanding contributed to a greater sense of ownership and motivation. This sense of agency was particularly important for learners with SEN, who may otherwise experience schooling as highly structured and externally controlled. By incorporating choice, teachers were able to support autonomy while still maintaining clear instructional goals.

Culturally responsive teaching was also highlighted as a key strategy for fostering belonging and participation. Educators recognized that learners bring diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds into the classroom, and that inclusive teaching must acknowledge and value these differences. When instruction reflected learners' lived experiences, students were more likely to feel seen and included within the learning environment. This cultural responsiveness contributed not only to academic engagement but also to identity affirmation and social belonging.

These classroom-level practices are consistent with broader systemic understandings of inclusion as a multidimensional construct. Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) emphasize that inclusion encompasses multiple interrelated dimensions, including physical presence, social participation, and psychological belonging. Similarly, Nilholm and Göransson (2017) argue that inclusion is often variably defined in educational research, but consistently involves the idea that all learners should be active participants in meaningful educational experiences. The findings of this synthesis align with these interpretations by demonstrating that inclusion is fundamentally about participation rather than placement.

At a policy level, inclusive education is increasingly framed as a legal and ethical requirement. The Norwegian Education Act (1998) explicitly mandates adapted education for all learners, reinforcing the principle that schools are responsible for ensuring equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities. However, as Ogden (2014) notes in the context of Norwegian special education, translating these legal mandates into everyday classroom practice requires significant professional interpretation and adaptation. Teachers must therefore navigate between policy expectations and the complex realities of diverse classrooms, often relying on professional judgment to enact inclusive principles.

Empirical research also supports the importance of participation and belonging as outcomes of inclusive education. Krämer, Möller, and Zimmermann (2021), in their meta-analysis, found that inclusive education for students with

learning difficulties is associated not only with academic outcomes but also with improvements in social integration and classroom participation. This reinforces the idea that inclusion should be evaluated in terms of both cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Nordahl et al. (2018) further emphasize the importance of inclusive communities in promoting children's holistic development. Their work highlights that inclusive learning environments are characterized by strong social relationships, shared responsibility, and active participation among all learners. Such environments foster a sense of collective belonging, which is essential for sustaining engagement and motivation in learning.

However, the implementation of inclusive participation is not without challenges. Ratner (2016) highlights the persistent tension between segregated and inclusive models of special education, noting that educational systems often continue to operate within structures that separate learners based on perceived ability. These structural legacies can limit opportunities for genuine participation, particularly when learners with SEN are provided with reduced or parallel curricula that restrict engagement in shared learning experiences.

Reindal (2016) offers an important ethical perspective on these challenges, arguing that inclusion should be grounded in a capabilities approach that emphasizes what learners are able to do and become within educational contexts. From this perspective, inclusion is not simply about access to classrooms but about expanding learners' real opportunities for participation and development. This aligns closely with the synthesis findings, which highlight learner agency as a central component of inclusive practice.

In addition, inclusion is shaped by broader conceptual ambiguities in the field. Nilholm and Göransson (2017) note that definitions of inclusion vary widely across studies, ranging from narrow interpretations focused on placement to broader conceptualizations emphasizing participation and achievement. This variability underscores the importance of understanding inclusion as a flexible and context-dependent process rather than a fixed set of practices.

Munn et al. (2018) and Peters et al. (2020) further emphasize that methodological clarity in educational research is essential for developing coherent understandings of complex phenomena such as inclusion. While their focus is on scoping review methodology, their work highlights the importance of systematically mapping diverse evidence to inform educational practice. This is particularly relevant for inclusive education, where evidence spans multiple disciplines, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks.

The synthesis demonstrates that inclusive classrooms are characterized by intentional efforts to promote participation, belonging, and learner agency. These outcomes are achieved through pedagogical strategies such as cooperative learning, peer interaction, shared problem-solving, learner choice, dialogic teaching, and culturally responsive practices. However, inclusion is not solely the result of instructional design; it is also shaped by broader structural, policy, and ethical factors that influence how participation is enabled or constrained. Ultimately, inclusive education is best understood as a multidimensional process in which emotional safety, social relationships, and active engagement form the foundation for meaningful learning experiences.

Theme 4: Reflective Professional Practice Supports Sustainable Inclusive Pedagogy

The final synthesized theme highlights reflective professional practice as a central mechanism sustaining effective inclusive pedagogy. Across the reviewed qualitative studies, teachers consistently described inclusive education not as a fixed set of techniques, but as an evolving and adaptive professional process. This perspective positions teaching as inherently dynamic, requiring continuous interpretation of classroom experiences and ongoing refinement of instructional decisions in response to learner diversity.

Rather than implementing rigid or predetermined instructional programs, educators emphasized the importance of responding to real-time classroom evidence. Reflection was frequently grounded in multiple sources of professional knowledge, including learner responses during instruction, systematic and informal classroom observations, assessment data, feedback from families, and insights gained through collaboration with colleagues. These reflective inputs enabled teachers to continuously recalibrate their instructional approaches, ensuring that teaching remained responsive to both academic and socio-emotional needs of learners with special educational needs (SEN).

This adaptive orientation aligns with organizational theories that conceptualize schools as complex and loosely coupled systems. Weick and McDaniel (1989) argue that professional organizations such as schools function through distributed decision-making rather than centralized control. Within this structure, individual educators must continuously interpret and respond to evolving conditions, making reflection an essential mechanism for coordination and coherence. In inclusive classrooms, where learner variability is high and instructional demands are multifaceted, such reflective responsiveness becomes even more critical.

Teachers in the synthesized studies frequently described reflection as a process of questioning assumptions about learner capabilities. Rather than viewing student performance through fixed labels or deficit-based interpretations, educators engaged in ongoing reconsideration of how instructional practices could be modified to better support participation and understanding. This reflective stance aligns with inclusive pedagogical principles that emphasize the importance of viewing learner differences as instructional opportunities rather than barriers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). By continuously interrogating their own assumptions, teachers were able to develop more flexible and equitable instructional strategies.

Professional collaboration also played a significant role in supporting reflective practice. Educators reported that engagement in professional learning communities, mentoring relationships, and collaborative inquiry processes strengthened their capacity to reflect critically on their teaching. Wiener (2007) emphasizes that effective professional teamwork is not simply about coordination but about generating shared meaning through collaborative analysis and problem-solving. In inclusive education contexts, such collaborative reflection enables teachers to draw on diverse perspectives when interpreting learner needs and evaluating instructional effectiveness.

The importance of reflective practice is further reinforced by broader ethical and professional frameworks in education. Willower and Licata (1997) argue that educational decision-making is fundamentally value-laden, shaped by educators' beliefs about fairness, responsibility, and the purpose of schooling. Reflection, therefore, is not only a technical process but also an ethical one, requiring teachers to examine how their instructional choices align with principles of equity and inclusion. This ethical dimension is particularly important in special education, where decisions can significantly affect learners' access to opportunities and support.

Legal and policy frameworks also contribute to shaping reflective practice in inclusive education. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and related legal interpretations emphasize the requirement for individualized and appropriate educational programming. Yell (2016) highlights that special education law mandates schools to provide instruction tailored to learners' unique needs, reinforcing the importance of ongoing assessment and instructional adjustment. The Supreme Court ruling in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District further strengthened this expectation, with Yell and Bateman (2017) arguing that educational programs must demonstrate meaningful progress rather than minimal compliance. These legal standards implicitly require educators to engage in continuous reflection to ensure that instructional practices remain responsive and effective.

Despite these legal and professional expectations, inclusive education practice is influenced by broader systemic tensions. Engsig (2016) traces the evolution of inclusive education policies in Denmark, noting a shift from rights-based approaches toward accountability-driven frameworks. This shift can create pressures that influence how teachers interpret and implement inclusive practices, sometimes prioritizing measurable outcomes over reflective and relational aspects of teaching. Similarly, Ferri (2012) critiques Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks for potentially reinforcing deficit-oriented thinking by categorizing learners based on levels of need, which may limit more holistic reflective practices.

Nevertheless, reflective professional practice remains a key driver of sustainable inclusive pedagogy. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasize that inclusive pedagogy involves extending what is ordinarily available to all learners, rather than designing separate instruction for different groups. This requires teachers to engage in continuous reflection about how classroom practices can be adapted to maximize participation and learning for all students. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) further highlight that inclusive education research is marked by conceptual diversity and empirical limitations, reinforcing the need for reflective practitioners who can interpret and adapt research insights within specific classroom contexts.

International perspectives on inclusive education also underscore the importance of reflective practice in sustaining inclusive systems. Halinen and Järvinen (2008) describe the Finnish education system as one that relies heavily on teacher professionalism and reflective autonomy to implement inclusive policies effectively. Similarly, Jónsson (2016) emphasizes that inclusive education requires critical reflection on institutional practices that may unconsciously reproduce exclusionary norms, particularly those influenced by medicalized views of learner difference.

In addition, Kärnä (2015) highlights that the development of supportive learning environments for learners with autism and intellectual disabilities depends on teachers' ability to reflect on both environmental and instructional factors influencing learning. This reinforces the idea that reflective practice is not limited to pedagogical strategies but also includes consideration of classroom structure, social interaction, and emotional climate.

The synthesis further suggests that reflection is closely linked to professional growth and sustainability in inclusive education. Teachers who engage in systematic reflection are better able to adapt to learner diversity, manage classroom complexity, and develop confidence in their instructional decision-making. Over time, this contributes to the development of expertise that supports long-term inclusive practice rather than short-term instructional fixes.

Thus, reflective professional practice emerges as a foundational element of sustainable inclusive pedagogy. It enables educators to continuously interpret classroom experiences, adjust instructional strategies, and align teaching with both ethical and legal expectations. Supported by collaboration, professional learning communities, and ongoing inquiry, reflection transforms inclusive teaching into a dynamic process of continuous improvement. Ultimately, it ensures that inclusive education remains responsive, context-sensitive, and grounded in the lived realities of learners and educators alike.

Conclusion:

This qualitative evidence synthesis set out to integrate existing qualitative research on pedagogical approaches in special education, with the aim of identifying recurring principles that characterize effective inclusive teaching across diverse educational contexts. By synthesizing findings from multiple studies, the review moved beyond isolated instructional strategies to develop a more coherent understanding of how inclusive pedagogy is enacted in practice. The analysis generated four interrelated themes: learner-centered and differentiated instruction, collaborative partnerships, inclusive classroom cultures that promote participation and belonging, and reflective professional practice.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that effective inclusive teaching is not defined by a single method or specialized intervention, but by a set of interconnected pedagogical orientations. Across the synthesized literature, teachers consistently emphasized flexibility in instruction, responsiveness to learner diversity, and the importance of creating learning environments where all students can participate meaningfully. Differentiation emerged not as an optional adaptation but as a foundational principle of teaching that supports access and engagement for all learners. Similarly, inclusion was consistently understood as more than physical placement, encompassing participation, belonging, and learner agency within classroom communities.

The synthesis further highlights that inclusive education is inherently collaborative. Effective pedagogical practice depends on sustained partnerships among teachers, specialists, families, and support staff. These collaborative relationships enable the sharing of knowledge about learners' needs and strengths, promote consistency across learning environments, and strengthen instructional decision-making. In this sense, inclusion is not an individual teacher responsibility alone, but a shared professional endeavor that requires coordinated effort across multiple stakeholders.

Another key insight from the study is the central role of classroom climate in supporting inclusive outcomes. Participation, belonging, and emotional safety were consistently identified as essential conditions for learning. When learners feel respected, valued, and socially connected, they are more likely to engage actively in academic tasks and develop a sense of agency in their learning. This underscores the inseparable relationship between cognitive development and socio-emotional well-being in inclusive education settings.

Finally, the synthesis emphasizes reflective professional practice as a sustaining force in inclusive pedagogy. Teachers' ongoing reflection on instructional decisions, learner responses, and collaborative feedback enables continuous adaptation and improvement of practice. Reflection allows educators to critically examine assumptions about learner ability and refine strategies to better meet diverse needs. When supported by professional learning communities and collaborative inquiry, reflective practice contributes to long-term pedagogical development and sustainability in inclusive education.

Overall, the findings of this synthesis suggest that inclusive education is best understood as a dynamic, relational, and adaptive process. It requires teachers to integrate instructional flexibility, collaborative engagement, inclusive classroom cultures, and reflective practice into a coherent pedagogical approach. Rather than being implemented through standardized techniques, inclusive education emerges through ongoing professional judgment and contextual responsiveness.

This study contributes to the field by consolidating fragmented qualitative evidence into an integrated framework that can inform teacher education, professional development, and policy formulation. It highlights that improving inclusive education requires not only technical instructional knowledge but also relational, ethical, and reflective competencies among educators. By foregrounding these interconnected dimensions, the synthesis reinforces the view that inclusive teaching is both a pedagogical practice and a professional commitment to equity and participation for all learners.

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