

**When inclusion becomes personal: Psychological pathways shaping teachers' attitudes
toward learners with disabilities**

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Abstract

Teachers' attitudes toward learners with disabilities are shaped not only by knowledge of inclusive education but also by how teachers interpret learner potential, experience classroom emotions, judge their own competence, and perceive support around them. This qualitative study explored these processes through interview responses from 15 teachers working in mainstream South African primary schools. Responses to a semi-structured interview schedule were analysed thematically, focusing on understandings of disability, beliefs about learner capability, emotional experiences, confidence in inclusive teaching, and contextual influences on motivation. Four interconnected findings emerged. First, teachers increasingly interpreted disability through learner diversity and environmental barriers rather than diagnosis alone. Second, beliefs about learner potential influenced expectations, participation and willingness to adapt teaching. Third, empathy, satisfaction and joy coexisted with frustration, uncertainty and guilt, while reflection helped teachers distinguish situational strain from attitudes toward learners. Fourth, perceived competence shaped willingness to experiment, while collaboration, time, resources and specialist support influenced whether confidence translated into action. The findings suggest that teachers' attitudes are dynamic psychological constructions formed through experience and context. Inclusive teacher development should therefore address beliefs, emotional reflection, self-efficacy and relational support together rather than treating attitude as a fixed personal characteristic.

Keywords: teacher attitudes, disability, self-efficacy, inclusive education, teacher

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is not implemented through policy statements alone. It is enacted through everyday decisions about who is expected to learn, what forms of participation are considered legitimate, and how teachers respond when conventional teaching approaches do not work. For learners with disabilities, these decisions are particularly consequential because teachers' expectations, emotional responses and perceived competence can influence the opportunities made available to them. Recent research continues to identify teachers' attitudes as an important component of inclusive practice, while also showing that attitudes are intertwined with self-efficacy, school environment, professional learning and beliefs about teaching and learning (Azevedo et al., 2025).

Psychological perspectives are useful because they move the discussion beyond the assumption that teachers either support or resist inclusion. Teachers may simultaneously value belonging and feel uncertain about how to respond to complex support needs. They may experience empathy for a learner while feeling frustrated by large classes or limited specialist assistance. They may hold high expectations while lacking confidence in assessment adaptations. Such tensions suggest that attitudes are not static dispositions but are continually interpreted and reconstructed through classroom experience. Dignath et al. (2022), for example, conceptualised teachers' belief systems in terms of cognitive appraisals, emotional appraisals and self-efficacy, demonstrating that these components are related but distinguishable.

Recent evidence further strengthens the psychological interpretation. Azevedo et al. (2025) found relationships among teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy and perceived school environment, with self-efficacy playing an important mediating role. Diseth (2025) similarly reported relationships among inclusive attitudes, self-efficacy and strength-based beliefs. A 2026 network meta-analysis of 128 studies involving more than 50,000 teachers identified social modelling, inclusive behavioural practices and intentions to act inclusively as important correlates of teacher self-efficacy (Giorgi et al., 2026). These findings indicate that psychological processes are embedded within social and organisational conditions rather than located exclusively within the individual teacher.

The South African context makes this issue particularly important. Recent South African research has documented teachers' concerns about insufficient training, overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching time and inadequate support when attempting to respond to diverse learning needs

(Motitswe, 2025). Research involving South African teachers working with learners with severe intellectual disabilities has also shown that attitudes may vary across dimensions of inclusion, communication, socialisation and perceived teacher capability (Beard et al., 2024). These findings indicate that a general statement that teachers are ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ toward inclusion may conceal important psychological differences in how teachers interpret disability and their own role.

Although the literature increasingly connects attitudes with self-efficacy and contextual support, less attention has been given to how these psychological dimensions are experienced together in teachers’ own accounts of everyday inclusive teaching. The present article addresses this issue by examining teachers’ descriptions of beliefs, emotions, perceived competence and contextual influences. The purpose is not to measure the prevalence of particular attitudes, but to illuminate the psychological processes through which attitudes are formed, challenged and sustained. The article asks: How do teachers describe the psychological and contextual processes that shape their attitudes toward learners with disabilities in mainstream primary schools?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research design and participants

The study used a qualitative exploratory design to examine teachers’ accounts of psychological experiences associated with inclusive teaching. The interview dataset contained responses from 15 teachers working in mainstream primary schools. Participants included foundation-phase, intermediate-phase and senior-phase teachers, with reported experience in inclusive education ranging from approximately 5 to 25 years. The dataset was designed to capture variation in experience and emphasis, including learner-centred support, collaboration, assessment flexibility, belonging, resilience, mentoring and school-based support.

2.2 Data collection

Data were generated through a semi-structured interview schedule. Questions explored teachers’ understandings of disability, beliefs about the learning abilities of learners with disabilities, emotional experiences, confidence in meeting diverse learning needs, motivation, perceived challenges, and changes in beliefs and attitudes over time. The interview format allowed participants to describe both psychological experiences and the classroom conditions in which those experiences occurred.

2.3 Data analysis

The responses were analysed thematically. Initial reading focused on recurring psychological meanings within individual accounts, followed by cross-participant comparison. Related statements were grouped around beliefs about learner potential, emotional appraisal, perceived competence, and contextual support. The analysis then examined how these dimensions interacted rather than treating them as independent variables. Verbatim extracts were used selectively to preserve participants' meanings while keeping the article focused on analytical interpretation.

2.4 Ethical considerations

Participant identities are presented through numerical identifiers only. The article reports the interview material at a thematic level and does not include identifying information about individual teachers or schools. The analysis follows the principle that participants' accounts should be represented faithfully without attributing motives or characteristics that were not expressed in the dataset.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Disability was increasingly interpreted through learner diversity and environmental barriers

A strong pattern across the interviews was a shift away from understanding disability solely as an individual condition. Teachers frequently described disability in relation to the interaction between learner characteristics and the accessibility of teaching, assessment, communication and classroom resources. This perspective positioned the teacher as an active participant in creating or reducing barriers rather than as a passive responder to a diagnosis.

“Disability in the classroom is not simply a label attached to a learner. It involves the interaction between the learner's individual needs and the barriers created by the learning environment.” (Participant 01)

This way of thinking matters psychologically because teachers' interpretations of the source of learning barrier can influence their expectations and subsequent responses. When the barrier is located entirely within the learner, adaptation may appear unnecessary or unrealistic. When the barrier is understood as partly relational and environmental, teachers are more likely to consider

alternative routes to participation. Participants described breaking instructions into smaller steps, using oral explanations, visual prompts, shorter written tasks, additional time and alternative ways of demonstrating understanding. These accounts are consistent with recent work showing that teachers' beliefs about inclusion are linked to how they conceptualise learner difference and inclusive practice (Dignath et al., 2022; Selisko et al., 2024).

The finding also speaks directly to South African evidence. Motitswe (2025) reported the persistence of medical-model understandings alongside concerns about training and systemic constraints. The present accounts suggest that some teachers are developing a more barrier-sensitive interpretation in which disability does not automatically determine educational potential. Importantly, this should not be read as evidence that all teachers hold the same view. Rather, the interviews show how practical experience can gradually reshape the meaning teachers attach to disability.

Beliefs about learner potential shaped expectations and interaction

Participants repeatedly rejected the assumption that a diagnosis could determine what a learner could achieve. Their accounts contained a recurring distinction between maintaining meaningful expectations and providing differentiated routes toward those expectations. Teachers described fairness as equitable access rather than identical treatment, and several linked their beliefs to opportunities for participation, independence and challenge.

“What support will make this possible? rather than ‘Can this learner do it?’” (Participant 02)

This distinction is psychologically significant because beliefs about capability can influence the goals teachers set, the opportunities they provide and the degree to which they persist when initial strategies fail. A strength-based orientation was particularly visible in participants' descriptions of learner progress. Teachers reported that seeing learners demonstrate abilities that had not initially been visible strengthened their confidence in learner potential. Recent evidence similarly links strength-based beliefs and teacher self-efficacy with inclusive attitudes (Diseth, 2025).

The interviews also suggest that beliefs are reinforced through experience. Teachers did not describe their views as simply acquired from policy or formal training. Instead, they referred to practical encounters, learner progress, reflection and collaboration. This aligns with Dignath et al.

(2022), whose meta-analysis found that teacher education and practical experiences can contribute to changes in cognitive, emotional and efficacy-related beliefs. In this dataset, experience appeared to work as a psychological feedback process: teachers adapted their interpretation of learner capability, observed the consequences of those adaptations, and used the resulting experience to refine their expectations.

Emotional experiences were mixed, but reflection helped regulate their meaning

Participants did not describe inclusive teaching as emotionally uniform. Empathy, satisfaction, joy and a sense of accomplishment were reported alongside frustration, uncertainty, guilt and feeling overwhelmed. This coexistence is important because it challenges a simple positive-negative classification of teacher attitudes. Emotional difficulty did not necessarily indicate rejection of inclusion. In several accounts, frustration was explicitly attributed to limited resources, time pressures or uncertainty rather than to the learner.

“The frustration was often connected to inadequate resources, limited time or uncertainty about what to do, rather than the learner themselves.” (Participant 02)

The psychological process described here resembles emotional appraisal followed by reflective reappraisal. When teachers experienced learner progress, they described greater willingness to persevere and try alternative strategies. When they felt overwhelmed, they recognised a risk of becoming more focused on curriculum completion than on adaptation. Reflection allowed them to separate situational frustration from their relationship with the learner. This is consistent with research that treats teachers’ emotional appraisals as a meaningful component of their broader belief systems about inclusion (Dignath et al., 2022).

The finding also has implications for teacher wellbeing. Recent research has linked attitudes and self-efficacy with burnout-related processes in inclusive settings (Vieira et al., 2024), while South African research has highlighted teachers’ feelings and practical experiences in full-service schools (Hugo & Mobara, 2024). The present accounts suggest that emotional support should not be reduced to generic stress management. Teachers may benefit from structured opportunities to analyse the source of difficult emotions, distinguish learner-related concerns from system-related constraints, and develop practical responses.

Perceived competence shaped the movement from intention to inclusive action

Perceived competence emerged as a central psychological mechanism. Participants commonly described themselves as moderately or reasonably confident rather than completely confident. They felt capable of basic differentiation and relationship building but were less certain when learners required specialised knowledge, equipment or complex support. Confidence was therefore described as conditional rather than absolute.

“When my confidence is high, I am more willing to experiment with different strategies.”
(Participant 01)

The accounts indicate that perceived competence influenced teachers’ behavioural choices. Higher confidence was associated with experimentation, flexibility, modified activities, peer support and communication with parents and support professionals. Lower confidence was associated with caution and reliance on familiar teaching methods, even when those methods were not fully accessible. This pattern is strongly supported by recent research. Azevedo et al. (2025) found a positive relationship between self-efficacy and inclusive attitudes, while Giorgi et al. (2026) identified social modelling, behavioural practice and intentions to act inclusively among important correlates of teacher self-efficacy.

The findings also refine the idea that competence is simply a personal characteristic. Participants frequently described confidence as dependent on access to information, planning time, colleagues, school-based support structures and professional development. Thus, perceived competence appeared partly relational. A teacher could feel capable in one situation and uncertain in another, depending on the complexity of the learner’s needs and the resources surrounding the teacher. This interpretation is consistent with recent work connecting attitudes and self-efficacy with school climate (Azevedo et al., 2025) and with collaboration in inclusive teaching (Schnepel et al., 2025).

Contextual support shaped whether positive psychological orientations could become practice

Although the article focuses on psychological factors, participants consistently located those factors within classroom conditions. Large classes, limited resources, competing curriculum demands, insufficient specialist support and limited time were repeatedly identified as pressures that

could test motivation and confidence. The important analytical point is that context did not replace psychology; it interacted with it.

Teachers who believed strongly in inclusion could still experience frustration when the classroom conditions made individual attention difficult. Conversely, teachers described colleagues, school-based support structures and professional development as resources that transformed uncertainty into informed action. This supports the argument that teacher attitudes should not be interpreted as isolated personal preferences. South African research similarly identifies inadequate training, overcrowding, limited time and insufficient support as conditions associated with difficulties in inclusive implementation (Motitswe, 2025).

The interaction between psychological and contextual processes can be represented as a dynamic pathway: beliefs influence emotional appraisal and expectations; emotional appraisal influences persistence and reflection; perceived competence influences whether teachers translate intentions into adaptive action; and contextual support strengthens or constrains that process. This interpretation is compatible with contemporary research linking attitudes, self-efficacy, school climate and collaboration (Azevedo et al., 2025; Schnepel et al., 2025). It also reflects evidence that teachers' attitudes, control beliefs and intentions can connect with inclusive behaviours (Yang et al., 2024).

An integrated psychological account of teacher attitudes

Taken together, the findings suggest that teachers' attitudes toward learners with disabilities are better understood as dynamic psychological constructions than as fixed positive or negative dispositions. Four processes were especially interconnected. First, teachers interpreted learner difference through beliefs about disability and potential. Second, those interpretations were accompanied by emotional experiences that could motivate persistence or signal the need for reflection. Third, perceived competence influenced whether teachers felt able to convert inclusive intentions into differentiated practice. Fourth, contextual support affected the stability of all three processes.

The resulting account can be summarised as a psychological pathway from interpretation to action. A teacher's belief that a learner can participate creates a basis for high but flexible expectations. Emotional responses to learner progress or difficulty then influence persistence and reflection. Perceived competence determines whether the teacher feels able to experiment with

appropriate responses. Collaboration, resources, time and specialist support either reinforce or constrain this process. The pathway is therefore recursive: successful adaptation can strengthen perceived competence and positive beliefs, while repeated difficulty without support can intensify uncertainty and reliance on familiar practice.

This interpretation contributes to the educational psychology literature by placing teachers' attitudes within a process model that connects cognition, emotion, self-efficacy and context. It also avoids treating difficult emotions as evidence of negative attitudes. A teacher can experience frustration and still maintain a strong commitment to inclusion when the frustration is understood as a response to situational constraints. Similarly, confidence does not automatically produce inclusive practice if the organisational environment provides insufficient opportunities or resources.

4. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The article is based on qualitative interview accounts from 15 teachers and therefore does not seek statistical generalisation. The findings represent participants' reported experiences and should not be treated as direct measures of classroom behaviour. Future research could combine interviews with classroom observations and longitudinal designs to examine how beliefs, emotional experiences and perceived competence change across different inclusive teaching situations. Comparative research across rural and urban settings could also clarify how contextual conditions interact with psychological processes.

5. CONCLUSION

The study shows that teachers' attitudes toward learners with disabilities are shaped through an ongoing interaction among beliefs, emotions, perceived competence and contextual support. Teachers described a movement from diagnosis-centred interpretations toward understandings of disability as learner diversity shaped by environmental barriers. Beliefs about learner potential influenced expectations and opportunities for participation, while emotional experiences could either strengthen persistence or create pressure that required reflective regulation. Perceived competence influenced teachers' willingness to experiment with inclusive strategies, but confidence was strengthened when teachers had access to colleagues, professional learning, planning time and school-based support. The findings therefore suggest that professional development for inclusive education should address psychological processes alongside practical conditions. Programmes that cultivate strength-based beliefs, reflective emotional practice, applied self-efficacy and collaborative problem solving may help teachers translate inclusive intentions into classroom action. At the same time, psychological development cannot substitute for adequate resources and organisational support. The central implication is that teacher attitudes should be understood as dynamic and context-sensitive processes that can develop through meaningful experience, reflection and supported practice.

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