

Research Article

Cite this article: Banimakhzoom, A., Alali, S., & Ogdol, R. (2026). Investigating Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions and Readiness in Implementing Inclusive Pedagogy in the UAE. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 23, e2026068. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2026.23.68>

Received August 16, 2025
Accepted October 28, 2025

Keywords: Inclusive pedagogy; Special needs; Students of Determination; Early childhood education.

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Investigating Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions and Readiness in Implementing Inclusive Pedagogy in the UAE

Amna Banimakhzoom , Shahad Alali , Robin Ogdol **Abstract**

Background/purpose. Inclusive education remains a central priority in early childhood education (ECE) across the United Arab Emirates, with national frameworks advocating equitable learning environments for students of determination (SOD). Despite strong policy support, teachers continue to face practical challenges that hinder the full realization of inclusive pedagogy in classroom settings. This study sought to explore how ECE teachers perceive and enact inclusive practices in their classrooms, capturing their professional insights into the successes, concerns, and systemic barriers they face.

Materials/methods. A qualitative research design guided the study, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 17 early childhood educators. Thematic analysis was employed within a social constructivist framework to explore patterns emerging from their professional reflections and classroom experiences.

Results. Teachers described a strong sense of professional commitment and intention to support students of determination. However, their implementation efforts were consistently challenged by difficulties in curriculum differentiation, behavior management, and a lack of coordinated support from administrators and families. Themes of cultural resistance, fragmented teamwork, and a need for hands-on professional development were evident throughout the data.

Conclusion. Teachers' accounts underscore the importance of bridging theoretical training with practical realities, providing targeted support systems, and fostering collaborative school environments. This study contributes to the understanding of inclusive pedagogy within ECE settings in the UAE and provides recommendations for systemic improvements in teacher preparation, school leadership, and inclusive education policy enactment.



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1. Introduction

1.1. Global and UAE Contexts of Inclusive Education

In the past, students with disabilities faced significant challenges in accessing quality education, often placed in segregated classrooms with limited resources and insufficient support (Winzer, 1993). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) marked a major turning point, urging governments to adopt inclusive education as a human right. It emphasized the importance of including all children, regardless of ability, in mainstream schools, laying the foundation for global inclusion movements (Ainscow et al., 2019).

In response to these international frameworks, many countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), developed policies to support inclusion. The UAE launched the "School for All" initiative under Federal Law No. 29 of 2006, ensuring equal education rights for students with disabilities in both public and private schools (Massouti et al., 2024). This program enables students to access educational services tailored to their individual needs (MOE, 2010), reinforcing the country's commitment to equity and accessibility (Hussain, 2017).

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite these efforts, the practical implementation of inclusive education continues to face obstacles. Alborn (2017) identified several challenges, including inadequate teacher preparation, limited support services, and insufficient use of assistive technologies. Teachers may also struggle with cultural or religious misunderstandings, further complicating their ability to support students effectively.

Moreover, attitudes toward inclusion vary. Some teachers still favor traditional special education models, believing that students with special needs often lack the skills needed to succeed in mainstream settings (Gaad & Khan, 2007). This perspective was evident during the researchers' Teaching Practicums (TP), where students of determination were often sent to resource rooms with Special Education (SE) teachers. These pull-out systems provide targeted instruction, mainly in Arabic and math, but keep students separated from their peers during lessons (Gaad, 2010). Although these classes are within the same school buildings, true inclusion is not achieved if students continue to receive instruction in separate settings (Francisco et al., 2020). As De Beco (2022) argues, physical presence alone does not equate to genuine inclusion.

On the other hand, while some educators hold positive views of inclusive classrooms, they still express concerns that students with disabilities may make only limited academic and social progress in these settings (Anati & Ain, 2012). As a result, they emphasize the need for additional training and workshops to help teachers better support the diverse needs of these students (Leatherman, 2007). Kim et al. (2020) argue that addressing such concerns could lead to improved inclusion practices and reduce inequities. To effectively tackle these challenges, it is crucial to include the perspectives of early childhood educators in general education settings. Their insights can help shape practical policies and offer a clearer understanding of how inclusive education affects both students and teaching practices (Smith & Smith, 2000).

1.3. Rationale and Research Aim

With these insights in mind, this study aims to explore Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers' perceptions, intentions, attitudes, and concerns regarding implementing inclusive pedagogy for students of determination in the UAE. The goal is to raise awareness about the gap between policy and practice, inform the ministry about the challenges schools face, and advocate for more effective implementation of inclusion as envisioned by existing policies. This research aligns with UAE Vision 2021, which seeks to build a more inclusive society by ensuring equal educational opportunities for

students of determination (UAE Cabinet, n.d.), as well as with *We the UAE 2031*, which highlights the importance of learner-centered teaching that values diversity, meets every child's needs, and empowers teachers to create inclusive classrooms where all children feel they belong and can succeed (UAE Government, n.d.).

1.4. Research Questions

To investigate ECE teachers' views on implementing inclusive pedagogy for students of determination in the UAE, this study focuses on the following research questions based on the background and problem outlined above:

1. How do teachers describe their attitudes, self-efficacy, intentions, and concerns regarding the implementation of inclusive pedagogy for SOD?
2. What insights do teachers provide about how their attitudes shape their self-efficacy, intentions and concerns toward inclusive pedagogy for SOD?
3. What teacher experiences reveal about the role of self-efficacy in influencing their inclusive pedagogical intentions and concerns for SOD?
4. How do teachers' concerns inform or hinder their intentions to engage in inclusive teaching practices for SOD?
5. How do teachers in the United Arab Emirates perceive their experience with using inclusive education practices?

1.5. The Theoretical Framework

This study explores early childhood education (ECE) teachers' perceptions, intentions, attitudes, and concerns about implementing inclusive pedagogy for students of determination in the UAE. To understand what influences their approaches, this research uses the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Icek Ajzen (1985).

TPB is a widely accepted model for predicting social behavior by focusing on intentions, which are shaped by three key factors: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 2020; Kupers et al., 2024). Attitudes refer to how positively or negatively a person views a behavior. In this study, teachers' attitudes toward inclusion can strongly affect their willingness to adopt inclusive practices (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Jenson, 2018). Positive attitudes encourage participation and support for students with special needs, while negative attitudes can create barriers (Wogamon, 2013; Pančocha & Slepíčková, 2012).

In the UAE setting, where inclusive education is highly encouraged at the national level, the attitude of teachers becomes a key entry point to the implementation of policy into classroom practice. According to the TPB, subjective norms involve the social pressures and expectations teachers feel from colleagues, administrators, parents, and the wider community. (Ajzen, 1991; Hernandez et al., 2016). When teachers believe others expect and support inclusive education, they are more likely to intend to practice inclusion. However, teachers' concerns, such as lack of support, insufficient targeted training, or resource limitations, can act as internalized social or contextual pressures that interfere with their intentions, even when norms are supportive. These concerns may reflect perceived barriers, thus influencing both motivation and the perceived feasibility of inclusive teaching. This highlights the role of school leadership not only in promoting positive attitudes and motivating teachers but also in removing logistical and structural obstacles. Furthermore, TPB underscores the role of perceived behavioural control, teachers' confidence in their ability to implement inclusive strategies, as a major factor in turning intention into action (Ajzen, 2002; Özokcu, 2017). Higher self-efficacy supports stronger intentions to act inclusively.

Despite the explanatory power of TPB in understanding teachers' inclusive behaviours, research has also pointed out its shortcomings in explaining the complexity of the translation of intentions into classroom action. Studies applying TPB to inclusive education show that teachers' attitudes, perceived control, and social expectations influence their intentions and actual practices (Yan & Sin, 2013). However, TPB does not fully explain why intentions sometimes fail to lead to action. Research indicates a gap between what people plan and what they do, as well as the theory's limited consideration of emotions and habits (Sheeran & Webb, 2016; Sniehotta et al., 2014; Ryan & Worthington, 2021). While these limitations exist, TPB provides a useful framework to understand how attitudes, norms, concerns, and perceived control collectively influence early childhood teachers' inclusive decision-making and behaviours in UAE mainstream schools. These insights can help identify challenges and inform policy to support more effective inclusion of students with disabilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Inclusive Education: Key Concepts and Context

Inclusive education is a growing initiative that numerous international organizations committed to the education of individuals with disabilities work to promote across educational systems worldwide (Madhesh, 2023; Susilawati et al., 2023). In essence, inclusive education aims to ensure that every child has the utmost access to education without exception. It involves total acceptance of all students, fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom, where children with disabilities learn alongside their peers in regular schools, regardless of their differences or learning difficulties (Maphie, 2023).

Historically, the movement toward inclusive education has progressed from segregating students to integrating them, driven by advocacy for the rights of individuals with disabilities. A significant milestone in this development is UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which specifically highlights the importance of access for children with disabilities. This statement has become one of the most significant international policy initiatives in special education. Initially signed by 92 nations, it has since been adopted by numerous countries and organizations, reinforcing the importance of prioritizing the inclusion of children with disabilities in educational policies around the world (Magnússon, 2019; Hunt, 2011). Over the past 25 years, the Salamanca framework has had a significant impact on inclusive education by embedding inclusive principles within human rights, acknowledging regular schools as the primary setting for educating students with special needs, and shaping global initiatives to promote inclusion (Winzer & Mazurek, 2020).

2.2. The Importance of Inclusive Education

The significance of inclusive education is highlighted by its positive impacts on all children, regardless of whether they have disabilities or other disadvantages (Schuelka, 2018). For instance, a recent study conducted by Molina Roldán et al. (2021) revealed that students without disabilities gain several benefits from engaging in interactive learning activities with peers who have special educational needs (SEN). These benefits include developing respect for diversity and recognizing different abilities, which fosters new friendships. They also learn skills in assisting others' learning, develop patience, and find fulfilment in supporting their peers' growth. Moreover, they experience cognitive growth through explaining concepts and learning from the unique contributions of their SEN peers, enriching their own learning journey. Additionally, studies show that inclusive classrooms create a more effective academic and social environment for students with disabilities, as evidenced by their consistently higher grades across all subjects when integrated into regular education settings (Hemann, 2007). Ultimately, inclusive education fosters equality and social justice for all children, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, cognitive abilities, disabilities, or economic, social, health, and psychological conditions (Aladini, 2020).

2.3. Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Although inclusion offers many benefits, its implementation faces significant challenges, leading to skepticism about its feasibility and effectiveness in educating all students within the same environment (McMillan, 2008). For instance, teachers may struggle to create inclusive classrooms and provide adequate support if they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to meet diverse student needs (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). This lack of preparation often results in anxiety and self-doubt, negatively influencing teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and consequently affecting their teaching practices and student outcomes (Zagona et al., 2017; Fuchs, 2010).

Moreover, educators express concerns about limitations that hinder their ability to provide adequate support in inclusive classrooms, particularly the lack of sufficient teaching resources, planning time, specialist staff, funding, and appropriate infrastructure to support students with special educational needs and disabilities (Chataika et al., 2017; Warnes et al., 2022). In full-inclusion settings, they face the challenge of managing the diverse needs of both students with and without disabilities, which can be overwhelming and may compromise effective teaching for all students (Refice, 2006).

Another pertinent point to address is that teachers' perspectives are crucial to successful inclusion, as their attitudes can significantly influence the effectiveness of inclusive practices and their commitment to implementing them (Kauffman et al., 2022). The literature highlights that positive teacher attitudes toward inclusive education are vital for effectively implementing inclusive policies, while negative attitudes can create barriers in the classroom and undermine teachers' performance (Bansal, 2016). For instance, if a teacher is opposed to including a specific child in their classroom, even the best resources or training may not be sufficient to ensure a successful placement (Saloviita, 2020). This illustrates the critical role that teacher attitudes play in the success of inclusive practices.

Additionally, parental resistance remains a significant barrier to early identification and support for students of determination. Factors such as denial, fear of stigma, and cultural expectations often discourage families, especially within Middle Eastern societies, from seeking the help their children need (Embang, 2024; Alharbi, 2022). This hesitation can delay formal assessments and early interventions, making it harder for teachers to understand and address the unique needs of these students. Without this understanding, implementing effective teaching strategies becomes challenging, which can ultimately have a negative impact on the students' learning outcomes (Altokheas, 2023).

2.4. Inclusion: Ideals vs. Reality

While inclusive education has gained global attention, as highlighted in previous sections where it is described as an initiative promoted by international organizations to ensure that every child has access to education without exception (Madhesh, 2023; Ngadni et al., 2023), it continues to present significant challenges within the worldwide educational system. Despite numerous efforts and policies aimed at promoting inclusion, actual implementation often falls short. So far, no country has fully developed a school system that aligns with the ideals and intentions of inclusion as outlined by various international organizations (Haug, 2017). Societal challenges around inclusion are reflected in school practices and teachers' feedback, revealing that while schools aim to include all children, they struggle to support those needing special assistance to fully belong and participate (Biamba, 2016). These challenges underscore the need for a collaborative effort that extends beyond the school environment, as schools cannot change in isolation. Changes must also be made to the broader society economically, politically, and culturally (Qu, 2020). Meaningful change involves more than simply signing regulations and agreements by public authorities; it requires a committed and

consistent public policy that invests in training for teachers and paraprofessionals, along with essential support and resources (Mngo & Mngo, 2018).

2.5. Literature Gaps

While the UAE has made significant efforts to promote inclusive education through national policies and school initiatives, these efforts have focused on adopting international practices rather than being guided by local research. Consequently, there is limited research on how inclusion is implemented in UAE schools (Bock, 2015). Key gaps remain in understanding teacher attitudes and preparedness, as many educators lack sufficient training and support to implement inclusion effectively. Additionally, cultural and social barriers, such as denial, stigma, parental resistance, and cultural factors like extended family influence and traditional beliefs about disability, significantly affect how inclusion is practiced but have received limited attention. For example, research by Al Neyadi (2015) highlights that parents' attitudes towards inclusion are shaped by cultural factors, underscoring the importance of considering these barriers in developing inclusive practices.

These gaps between inclusive policy and actual practice are likely reflected in how early childhood teachers perceive their roles, form attitudes, develop intentions, and manage concerns related to inclusion. Moreover, the absence of localized research restricts the possibility of developing interventions that would be consistent with the realities of the UAE classrooms, cultural values, and school organization, which further contributes to the disconnect between vision and practice. Together, these factors impact the effectiveness of inclusive education and highlight the need for empirical research grounded in the UAE context to develop culturally responsive and practical strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, chosen for its capacity to uncover and interpret the classroom experiences of teachers as they construct meaning from their inclusive pedagogical practices. A narrative approach allows researchers to access teachers' personal and professional stories, revealing how beliefs, confidence, intentions, and concerns converge in real classroom contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rooted in a social constructivist paradigm, this design positions teachers as knowledge constructors rather than passive participants, emphasizing how social and institutional factors shape their perspectives on inclusion. The choice of narrative inquiry was intentional, given that inclusive education is not only a pedagogical issue but also a deeply personal and contextual one. Teachers' stories reveal the complexity of implementing inclusion beyond policy compliance, shedding light on their inner reflections, cultural interpretations, and emotional negotiations within UAE early childhood classrooms. The narrative method also enables a holistic understanding of inclusion by connecting classroom experience, reflective interpretation, and meaning-making processes, which would not be possible through purely quantitative approaches (Riessman, 2008).

3.2. Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in a private bilingual school in Ajman, United Arab Emirates, offering instruction in both English and Arabic and following the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. The school has been actively implementing inclusion in alignment with national and institutional directives supporting the UAE's 'School for All' policy and 'We the UAE 2031' Vision.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-random method used to identify individuals with direct experience relevant to the study's focus (Etikan et al., 2016). All 17 Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 2 homeroom teachers were included in the sample, as each plays a key role

in implementing inclusive education at the early childhood level. Teachers in these grades were considered ideal participants because they routinely adapt their teaching to accommodate the students of determination within mainstream settings. No restrictions were placed on gender, age, teaching experience, or nationality to preserve the diversity of perspectives within the institutional context. The study took place over eight weeks, allowing sufficient time for interview scheduling, transcription, and member checking.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which served as the sole instrument for this study. The interview design provided participants with the flexibility to share their experiences freely while ensuring that all five research questions were adequately explored. A total of 16 open-ended questions were developed, systematically addressing the constructs of attitudes, self-efficacy, intentions, and concerns (RQ1); the influence of attitudes on other constructs (RQ2); the role of self-efficacy in shaping intentions and concerns (RQ3); how concerns affect engagement in inclusive pedagogy (RQ4); and teachers' overall perceptions of inclusive education in the UAE context (RQ5). The scope of questioning enabled teachers to narrate their experiences from multiple perspectives - cognitive (beliefs and confidence), affective (attitudes and emotions), and behavioral (intentions and actions). Each question set encouraged reflection on their day-to-day teaching, specific classroom scenarios, institutional support, and their evolving perspectives on inclusion.

To ensure methodological rigor and content validity, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by three experts: a PhD in Education, Administration and Policy with 21 years' experience, a PhD in Early Childhood Education with 14 years' experience and a PhD in School Management and Leadership and Level 5 Diploma in Early Learning and Childcare with 15 years' experience who also served as mentor of the researchers. The panel provided feedback on question clarity, sequencing, and alignment with the research objectives, confirming that the questions were conceptually comprehensive and contextually appropriate for UAE teachers. This design aligns with Wilson's (2012) assertion that qualitative interviews allow teachers to describe their daily challenges, strategies, and reflections, providing deeper insights than standardized surveys could achieve.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Following institutional approval and participant consent, teachers were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews conducted either face-to-face or virtually, depending on availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a conversational tone to establish rapport and encourage detailed storytelling. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure credibility and confirm accuracy, transcripts were shared with participants for member checking, allowing them to verify, amend, or elaborate on their responses. Throughout the process, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Pseudonyms were used in transcription and reporting to protect participants' identities. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review committee, ensuring adherence to professional research ethics, informed consent, and voluntary participation.

3.5. Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. This included (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The analysis was iterative and interpretive, emphasizing participants' language, meanings, and experiences within their sociocultural context. Transcripts were coded manually and cross-checked by two independent researchers to enhance reliability and confirm thematic consistency. The emerging themes reflected teachers' emotional, cognitive, and practical responses to inclusion,

revealing how attitudes, confidence, intentions, and concerns intersect in shaping inclusive classroom practice.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study followed Nowell et al. (2017) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through member checking and triangulation supported by expert validation. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the research context and participant experiences. Dependability was maintained through a transparent audit trail documenting each stage of data analysis. At the same time, confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to minimize researcher bias and ensure analytical integrity. The narrative analysis produced a rich portrayal of teachers' classroom experiences, offering insights into how inclusive pedagogy is understood and enacted in early childhood settings in the UAE, bridging the gap between inclusive education policies and classroom realities.

3.6. Ethical Consideration

To ensure the research was conducted with integrity and aligned with internationally recognized ethical standards, the study underwent a formal ethical review process. Prior to initiating data collection, the researchers sought and obtained ethical clearance from their institution's Research and Ethical Integrity Committee (REIC), which reviewed the study's objectives, methodology, and data protection protocols. This approval affirmed that the study complied with institutional principles of accountability, informed consent, and participant welfare.

Following institutional approval, the researchers formally approached the administration of the participating school. A preliminary meeting was held with the school principal to present the research aims, outline participant expectations, and clarify data collection procedures. Upon review, the school granted written approval, including a signed ethical agreement authorizing the researchers to engage with staff members.

All participating teachers were fully informed of their rights, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the study's purpose. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. To safeguard participant anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the research process, ensuring that teachers' identities remained protected while their voices were authentically represented. This practice, as supported by Saunders et al. (2015), is a cornerstone of ethical qualitative research, allowing participants to share personal insights without fear of identification or reprisal. Ethical compliance was not only a procedural requirement but a foundational element of this study, reinforcing trust, transparency, and respect throughout the research process (Gajjar, 2013).

4. Results

This section presents the study's thematic findings based on the five guiding research questions. Drawing on the voices of 17 early childhood educators from a private bilingual school in the UAE, the results are organized thematically, using illustrative quotations from the interviews to highlight teachers' lived experiences, challenges, and reflections on inclusive pedagogy for students of determination (SOD).

4.1. Perceptions of Attitudes, Self-Efficacy, Intentions, and Concerns

Teachers generally expressed positive attitudes toward inclusive education. They perceived inclusion as both a moral imperative and a core professional responsibility, grounded in the belief that all children have the right to equitable access to learning. Inclusion was described not as a supplementary measure but as a fundamental aspect of good teaching. One participant noted, "I think every child should have the chance to learn with his or her peers. Inclusion should not be an

option. It should be the norm.” Another affirmed, “Inclusion elicits compassion and empathy in all students. It has changed the way my students treat each other.” These views reflected a shared belief that inclusion supports both academic and social development. Teachers noted that inclusive classrooms promote tolerance and respect, with educators modelling these values. Inclusion was seen as a way to prepare all students for a diverse world in which differences are accepted. Despite challenges, belief in the value of inclusion remained strong.

Regarding self-efficacy, participants had varied responses. Some expressed confidence, especially when given training and support. One teacher explained, “I feel that I can change my teaching style. It's difficult, but I know I can do it if I have the right tools.” However, others voiced doubts, particularly regarding students with severe needs: “There are times when I feel lost, particularly when I am unable to communicate with the child or to meet their emotional needs.” These moments left teachers feeling professionally inadequate, highlighting the need for sustained capacity building and emotional support.

Intentions to implement inclusive strategies were strong. Many spoke of their intrinsic motivation. Many participants emphasized a deep moral commitment to inclusivity. One participant shared, “I incorporate inclusive activities because I know the difference it makes. It may be difficult for me, but I know it's important.” Another remarked, “My intention is always to include, but sometimes I feel limited by the lack of time or support.”

Concerns about inclusion were widespread. Teachers frequently mentioned challenges related to behavioral needs, differentiated instruction, and limited access to specialists. Teachers cited issues such as behavior management, curriculum adaptation, and lack of specialized support. One teacher admitted, “I am afraid I will not be able to give each child enough attention. Inclusion sounds good, but in reality, it's overwhelming.” Such concerns revealed an emotional burden, suggesting the need for more systemic scaffolding to sustain teachers' inclusive efforts.

A teacher elaborated in a longer narrative:

When I have 25 children in the room, and three of them are requiring one-on-one support, I start to feel stretched. I try to plan, differentiate, and use visuals, but sometimes I fail. That makes me feel guilty because I know these children deserve better. I come home from school doubting if I've met anyone's needs that day. It is a constant pressure, and sometimes it feels like I am set up to fail.

This theme revealed the dual reality of teachers' motivation and frustration. While they aspired to create inclusive classrooms, the day-to-day realities often posed significant emotional and professional strain.

4.2. Influence of Attitudes on Self-Efficacy, Intentions, and Concerns

Teachers acknowledged that their positive beliefs about inclusion shaped their confidence and motivation. One stated, “Because I feel that all children have the right to belong, I challenge myself to find ways to support them.” Another said, “My attitude helps me to remain calm when I don't have all the answers.”

Yet, others revealed how attitudes sometimes clashed with practical constraints. “I believe in inclusion, but I also feel defeated some days. I can believe all I want in the world, but if you don't support me, inclusion isn't going to work,” one teacher noted. For others, attitudes fueled perseverance despite concerns. One teacher shared, “Despite my doubts, I believe in inclusion, and it keeps me going. I remind myself of what I chose to do for a living.”

Some teachers described internal tensions:

There is a huge gap between what I want to do and what I can do. My heart is in the right place, but my hands are tied. I need training, time, and a teaching assistant to help all the students. I understand the theory, but I need support and resources to facilitate the practice that I don't always have access to. It emotionally exhausts me when I can see what's needed, but I can't provide it.

This theme highlighted the complex relationship between personal values and structural classroom realities. Attitudes could either buffer or aggravate teachers' stress, depending on the level of external support available. Several participants described moments when their belief in inclusive education helped them persist through difficulty, especially when they felt emotionally invested in their students. In contrast, others shared how their positive outlook was tested when systemic barriers such as lack of time, large class sizes, or limited professional development, persisted. These accounts suggest that while teachers generally held strong philosophical support for inclusion, the translation of these values into consistent practice was mediated by their day-to-day realities. For some, the dissonance between their ideals and the logistical constraints of the classroom created emotional tension, further complicating their perceptions of what was realistically achievable.

4.3. Role of Self-Efficacy in Shaping Intentions and Addressing Concerns

Teachers' reflections revealed that confidence in their abilities significantly influenced their intentions to implement inclusive practices. One teacher asserted, "The more I get to do it, the more comfortable I become. Success is confidence, and confidence is the basis for my willingness to try new inclusive strategies."

Another recounted an integral situation:

I had a student who was non-verbal. He could not speak. I used picture cards and gradually he started to respond. That moment was my life-changing moment. It gave me the feeling that I could do this. His progress convinced me that there are little wins, and I began to use visuals with all my students.

However, when self-efficacy was low, teachers often hesitated to take initiative. A teacher shared, "Sometimes I don't try new things because I'm afraid they won't work. I don't want to fail the child." Training and peer support were key factors in boosting self-efficacy. "When I see other teachers doing fine, I am encouraged. Peer sharing sessions allow me to see what can be done."

The narratives underlined that self-efficacy was not static; it could be built or diminished depending on teachers' experiences, support networks, and access to resources. Teachers who had prior success stories or participated in training reported a stronger sense of confidence in adapting lessons and managing diverse needs. Others indicated that uncertainty and lack of exposure made them question their competence. For instance, one teacher shared that her confidence grew only after collaborating with therapists, while another described how repeated challenges without resolution eroded her belief in her capabilities. This variability in self-efficacy was closely tied to the professional ecosystem surrounding the teacher rather than individual disposition alone.

4.4. How Concerns Hinder or Shape Intentions

Concerns were a dominant theme throughout the interviews, affecting how teachers approached inclusion. Key concerns included classroom size, time constraints, and behavior management.

One teacher described the daily reality:

Some days I spend more time managing students than teaching. It affects the whole class. I want to include everybody, but it is a trade-off. Sometimes I feel that I am letting down both

the students who need help and those who do not. It forms a frustrated cycle that is difficult to break.

Another said, “There are not enough hours in the day to plan differentiated activities for each student. That's my biggest concern. I want to do it right but I'm tired.”

Two teachers identified institutional gaps:

We do not have an inclusion champion or SENCO [Special Educational Needs Coordinator]. Without one, we are only doing what we can on our own. There is no one to help us navigate through complex cases or provide specific strategies. We're walking the road of inclusion with good intentions but no map.

Despite concerns, some educators found ways to adapt. One explained, “I use group work and peer buddies. It helps, even when I feel like I am not doing enough.”

The theme revealed that while concerns could hinder intentions, teachers who received support and had autonomy found creative solutions. Participants described making practical accommodations, drawing from peer support, or using trial-and-error strategies to include students effectively. In contrast, others reported feeling isolated, overburdened, or constrained by rigid school policies, which led to frustration and inconsistent implementation of inclusive methods. The degree to which teachers could act on their intentions often depended on whether they felt empowered within their institutional setting. Some described a culture of flexibility and dialogue, while others perceived a lack of voice or resources.

4.5. Experiences of Implementing Inclusive Education in the UAE Context

Teachers shared mixed experiences shaped by the cultural and educational context of the UAE. Many praised recent policy initiatives: “The vision of 'School for All' is strong. It indicates that the country is on the right track.”

However, several noted a gap between policy and practice. “On paper, we are inclusive. In the classroom, we are overwhelmed.” one participant stated.

Parental involvement and societal attitudes emerged as critical factors. Some teachers described positive collaborations: “My partners are the parents of the students of determination. They provide information that I cannot find in a textbook.”

Others spoke of resistance:

Some parents are not ready. They don't want their child labeled or to sit next to somebody with a disability. That makes my work harder. I have had parents ask for transfers or complain when inclusion is brought up. It disheartening as it sends the wrong message to children about difference.

Another added, “There is still stigma. There is a need for more community awareness. Inclusion is not a school issue, it's a societal one.” School leadership was cited as both an enabler and a barrier. One teacher praised her principal: “She listens, observes and acts. Such leadership makes us powerful.”

Yet another reflected:

Sometimes, we are not consulted when decisions are made. Inclusion is perceived as imposed, not co-created. We have to be involved in the process. When we are not involved in planning, we get confused and resistant. Inclusion begins with including teachers in the conversation.

Teachers offered recommendations based on their experiences such as more hands-on training and workshops specific to UAE classrooms, parent engagement initiatives to reduce stigma, and collaborative decision-making involving teachers

One teacher summarized:

Inclusion is successful when we all work together - teachers, parents, administrators. It takes a village. No individual stakeholder can do this alone. When we work together, share resources, and listen to each other, inclusive education becomes a practice rather than a policy.

Overall, the results portray inclusion in the UAE as a promising but uneven journey. Teachers demonstrated dedication and creativity in responding to diverse learners' needs, often going beyond formal expectations. However, across the interviews, there was a consistent call for more professional development, stronger leadership engagement, and clearer policy direction. These perspectives conveyed both hope and concern, reflecting an educational context in transition, where inclusive aspirations are evident but not yet fully realized in everyday classroom realities.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that most early childhood educators hold fundamentally positive views towards inclusive pedagogy, indicating a shared belief in the right of all children to learn alongside their peers. These positive attitudes are especially important in the multicultural environment of the UAE, where inclusion is increasingly viewed as both a moral imperative and a professional standard (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; United Nations, 2015). Teachers linked inclusive classrooms to fostering empathy and respect, emphasizing their role in shaping inclusive values. However, this support for inclusion was tempered by concerns about workload, limited support structures, and a lack of professional training (Sharma et al., 2008; Forlin, 2010; San Martin et al., 2021). Despite this, many teachers maintained a strong sense of professional responsibility and expressed intrinsic motivation to adapt their practices, even amid systemic challenges. Self-efficacy levels varied, with some teachers expressing confidence and adaptability, while others felt overwhelmed when dealing with complex behavioral needs or insufficient resources (Abraham et al., 2021; Woodcock et al., 2022). Intentions to implement inclusive practices were consistent, though often moderated by practical limitations such as time constraints and administrative support. Concerns were persistent across the data, with teachers citing curriculum pressures, lack of assistants, and limited inclusion expertise in their schools as key challenges (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).

Teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusive pedagogy often translated into increased willingness to adopt inclusive practices. Participants who held inclusive beliefs generally reported stronger confidence in their ability to meet diverse learners' needs, highlighting the link between belief systems and practical engagement (Sharma & Sokal, 2015). Teachers described how a strong commitment to inclusion helped them persevere through difficulties and motivated them to seek new strategies. However, the data also indicated that positive attitudes alone were not always sufficient. Without adequate institutional support, these attitudes could be undermined by persistent stress and professional fatigue (Malinen et al., 2013). Several participants noted that while they believed in inclusion ideologically, their capacity to act on those beliefs was limited by factors such as large class sizes or lack of training. Furthermore, concerns about policy-practice gaps, unrealistic workload expectations, and minimal classroom assistance often coexisted with positive intentions, creating an internal conflict that shaped their actual classroom behaviors (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018).

The role of self-efficacy emerged as a strong factor influencing both teachers' intentions to implement inclusive practices and their ability to manage concerns. Teachers who perceived themselves as competent and equipped were more likely to take proactive steps toward inclusion.

For example, those who had previously experienced success with inclusion demonstrated resilience and a forward-thinking approach, in line with Abraham et al. (2021) and Sharma et al. (2012). Conversely, teachers who doubted their abilities or lacked proper training often reported hesitation, avoidance, or emotional exhaustion. Particularly challenging were cases involving students with complex needs or disruptive behaviors, where teachers acknowledged a need for specialized support or ongoing professional development (Wray et al., 2022; Aloka et al., 2024; Ogdol et al., 2024). Importantly, self-efficacy was not fixed, it evolved based on teachers' lived experiences, peer collaboration, access to training, and feedback. These findings underscore the value of context-sensitive interventions that strengthen teacher confidence through mentorship, resources, and collaborative learning communities.

While positive attitudes and intentions were present, teachers' concerns significantly influenced the actual implementation of inclusive strategies. Many participants expressed a strong desire to do better but felt constrained by structural limitations, such as a lack of time, insufficient resources, or the absence of inclusion experts (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Monsen et al., 2014). For some, these concerns led to frustration and guilt, particularly when they were unable to meet the needs of all learners. Others navigated their concerns through creative adaptations and peer collaboration, highlighting variability in how concerns are internalized and addressed. Interestingly, some teachers saw concerns not as obstacles but as signals of their commitment to quality practice and their desire to grow. This aligns with Passanisi et al. (2022), who note that emotional investment is an essential element in long-term commitment to inclusive teaching. Nevertheless, persistent concerns without proper support negatively impacted teacher well-being and reduced their motivation to innovate or persist. This reinforces the need for structured, ongoing support systems that reduce the emotional and logistical burden of inclusion (Odongo et al., 2016).

Teachers' experiences revealed a significant gap between policy directives and classroom realities in the UAE. Although national frameworks advocate for full inclusion, the implementation remains inconsistent across schools. Teachers noted that while inclusive education is a national priority, it often lacks localized, practical guidance. For instance, many schools do not have a designated SENCO or clearly defined support systems, leaving teachers to navigate inclusion independently (Garcia-Melgar et al., 2022; Grecu, 2022). Cultural factors, such as stigma or parental denial, further complicated implementation efforts (Alharbi, 2022; Embang, 2024). Teachers also highlighted the importance of school leadership and interdepartmental collaboration in creating a sustainable inclusive culture. In schools with supportive leadership, inclusion was more feasible and less stressful. In others, lack of administrative understanding or rigid academic expectations created friction. Many participants described relying on their own initiative, collaboration with peers, and trial-and-error strategies to include students of determination, pointing to the need for systematic and culturally responsive professional development (Vural et al., 2021; Arnaiz-Sanchez et al., 2023). Overall, while the UAE's inclusive education policy offers a strong foundation, bridging the gap between aspiration and application requires practical investment in human capital, leadership structures, and school-community partnerships.

6. Conclusion

This study explored early childhood education (ECE) teachers' views on implementing inclusive pedagogy for students of determination (SOD) in the UAE. The findings revealed several important relationships between teachers' concerns, self-efficacy, attitudes, and intentions. Teachers with fewer concerns reported higher levels of self-efficacy and were more likely to express positive attitudes and intentions to implement inclusive practices. Interestingly, a positive relationship was found between intentions and concerns, showing that even teachers with concerns were likely to express positive attitudes and intentions to implement inclusive practices. Interviews revealed these concerns reflected care and responsibility rather than hesitation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin

& Chambers, 2011; Malinen et al., 2013; Sharma et al., 2008). These findings support the idea that when teachers feel less overwhelmed or unsure, they are more confident and motivated to include students of determination in their classrooms. The study also confirmed a significant relationship between self-efficacy and both attitudes and intentions. Teachers who believed they could meet the needs of all students were more open to inclusive practices and more likely to apply them (Ajzen, 2011; Loreman et al., 2007; Sharma & Sokal, 2015). Similarly, attitudes were strongly linked to intentions, indicating that shaping teachers' beliefs about inclusion can influence their classroom decisions.

In response to the second research question, teachers in the UAE described a range of experiences. Some felt proud of their efforts to include SOD, while others highlighted persistent challenges such as a lack of training, insufficient classroom support, and limited collaboration among team members. Many acknowledged the importance of inclusion in theory but found implementation difficult in practice (Alshurman, 2020; Alzahrani, 2020; Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006).

However, these individual challenges often stem from broader structural issues. Teachers across the UAE have identified insufficient funding, a shortage of trained support staff, and unclear implementation policies as barriers that limit the impact of inclusive education (Massouti et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025; Alhammadi & AlDhaheeri, 2025). These structural limitations, reported both by school leaders and general education teachers, can make it difficult for inclusion to move beyond policy into daily practice.

While fostering positive attitudes, professional development, and collaboration remain essential, these efforts must be matched by concrete systemic support. When schools are equipped with sufficient funding, specialist staff, and clear frameworks, teachers are better positioned to put inclusive values into action. Addressing these systemic gaps is vital to ensure that all students, especially those of determination, are not only present in classrooms but are truly included, respected, and supported in their learning journeys.

Despite its contributions, this study had several limitations. Firstly, some participants demonstrated initial hesitance to share critical or negative experiences, potentially due to concerns about professional repercussions or job security. Although steps were taken to ensure anonymity, the sensitive nature of the topic may have led to guarded responses, limiting the depth of reflection in some interviews. Secondly, the data collection phase coincided with a period of heightened academic activity and ongoing school assessments, which created scheduling constraints. Several interviews had to be rescheduled or replaced with more readily available staff, which may have affected the intended sampling strategy and the diversity of perspectives captured.

Additionally, the qualitative findings reflect the views of teachers from a single institutional context, which may limit the generalizability of the results to broader ECE settings across the UAE. Lastly, while triangulation and peer validation were applied to enhance credibility, future studies may benefit from incorporating classroom observations or student perspectives to complement self-reported data.

Regardless of these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the conditions that support or hinder inclusive practice in UAE early childhood classrooms. Continued research with larger and more varied samples, along with mixed-method approaches, will be crucial to deepening understanding and informing policy development in inclusive education.

7. Suggestion

This study could serve as an impetus to investigate how the school curriculum supports inclusive pedagogy, particularly its flexibility in accommodating students with diverse learning needs. Quantitative analyses could assess the effectiveness of different curricular adaptations and teaching

strategies in fostering inclusion. Moreover, qualitative research could explore how inclusive pedagogy is applied in real-time through classroom observations, providing detailed insights into the strategies teachers use to support Students of Determination (SODs) and the contextual challenges they face. Additionally, expanding future studies to include Early Childhood Education levels from Pre-K to Grade 4 would provide a broader understanding of inclusive practices across early education stages, allowing for targeted improvements in instructional design and school-wide practices. Such research can ultimately inform strategic reforms that align with the UAE's national vision of inclusive, high-quality education for all learners.

In addition to curriculum reform and pedagogical adaptation, two policy-based interventions are essential: the introduction of compulsory pre-service inclusion modules and the creation of Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) training programs in UAE government and private schools. Incorporating required inclusion courses into teacher preparation curricula will ensure that every new teacher will be equipped with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills to accommodate diverse students. Such modules are to focus on inclusive planning, behavioural approaches, cooperation with specialists, and culturally responsive teaching in the UAE context. Moreover, a nationally standardized SENCO training and certification program would help create school-based inclusion leaders capable of organizing support services, leading instructional teams, and mediating between families and schools. Collectively, these would create systemic capacity to support inclusive education, empowering both educators and institutions to turn policy into practice and maintain inclusive teaching in early learning settings.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors have equal contributions.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding. The publishing of this study is not supported and funded by any institution.

Ethical Approval. The researchers got approval from the school principal and the mentor school teacher to conduct the study by signing the data collection request form and research ethics form. In addition, the researchers used pseudonyms to conceal participants' identities.

Data Availability Statement. The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the risk of compromising participant confidentiality and professional security. The participants were teachers, and sharing the raw data could potentially put their work at risk. Data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to institutional ethics approval.

Acknowledgments. The authors would like to express their sincere thanks to the participating teachers and school management for their cooperation and openness throughout this study. Special appreciation is extended to Ms. Sandra Kelleck, the former Primary Principal at Ajman Academy, for her support in facilitating the research process. Heartfelt appreciation is also extended to Author for his guidance and continuous support during each stage of the research. The authors are especially grateful to their families and colleagues for their encouragement, patience, and motivation along the way. Finally, the authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI, to assist with editing and improving the clarity and flow of this paper.

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