

Inside the Inclusive Classroom: Teachers' Reflections on the Challenges of Educating Girls with Learning Disabilities in Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores the challenges faced by learning disabilities teachers in implementing inclusive education for female students with learning disabilities in public schools in khamisMushyte city in Saudi Arabia. Through semi-structured interviews with 11 learning disabilities teachers, the study investigates the practical barriers encountered within inclusive classrooms and identifies key factors that influence effective teaching practices. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2012) framework, revealed several recurring challenges, including a lack of parental awareness, limited training for general education teachers, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient instructional materials, and inadequate administrative support. While some teachers acknowledged positive experiences due to their familiarity with inclusive practices and the relatively low need for physical accommodations for students with learning disabilities, systemic and instructional issues were found to hinder inclusive efforts. The study highlights the importance of targeted teacher preparation, interprofessional collaboration, supportive school leadership, and family engagement. It concludes with recommendations to strengthen inclusive education practices through evidence-based training, resource provision, and increased community awareness to better support female students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD), Differentiated Instruction, Learning Disabilities, Teacher Preparedness

Introduction:

Inclusive education has become a key focus in educational reform worldwide, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those with learning disabilities (LD). It promotes the principle that all learners, regardless of ability, should be educated together in general education settings with appropriate support. In Saudi Arabia, inclusive education is gaining momentum as schools increasingly work toward integrating students with disabilities—particularly girls with learning disabilities—into mainstream classrooms. This shift reflects a broader commitment to embracing diversity and accommodating individual differences through differentiated instruction, curriculum flexibility, environmental adaptations, and comprehensive support services.

Students with learning disabilities often experience persistent challenges in foundational academic areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, and executive functioning. These difficulties may lead to lower academic achievement, reduced classroom participation, and limited social interaction with peers. Addressing these needs requires more than simply placing students with disabilities in general classrooms; it demands thoughtful

pedagogical planning, access to specialized support, and inclusive school cultures that value all learners. Effective inclusive education, therefore, hinges on several critical elements: well-prepared teachers who can implement evidence-based instructional practices, school environments equipped with appropriate learning tools and resources, active administrative support, and meaningful family involvement. However, the success of inclusion also depends on how educators themselves experience and navigate these responsibilities in real-world settings.

In the Saudi context, and particularly within the Aseer region, limited research has been conducted on the perspectives of learning disabilities teachers who work directly with female students in inclusive environments. Understanding these teachers' experiences is essential to identifying the practical barriers and supports that shape inclusive practice on the ground. Their insights offer valuable guidance for improving inclusive education policies, teacher preparation programs, and school-level implementation strategies. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What challenges do learning disabilities teachers face in implementing inclusive education for female students with learning disabilities in public schools, and what factors support or hinder effective inclusive practices? By exploring this question through a qualitative lens, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the realities inside the inclusive classroom, while offering evidence-based recommendations to enhance educational equity for girls with learning disabilities in Saudi public schools.

Theoretical Framework

2.1 Learning Disabilities

1. Conceptual Perspective on Learning Disabilities

The term "Learning Disabilities" was proposed by Samuel Kirk in a 1963 meeting in New York, marking a breakthrough in clarifying the confusing variety of terms used to describe children with normal intelligence who experience learning difficulties. The growing awareness of the significant number of students in this category who had not received appropriate educational services led to increased attention to the issue. These students generally exhibit normal intelligence, do not show inappropriate behavioral disorders, and should not be placed in classrooms for emotionally disturbed students. Consequently, parents advocated for addressing their children's academic challenges in a suitable educational setting (Khasawneh et al., 2016).

The definition of learning disabilities has evolved due to various factors, including the differences in characteristics of students with learning disabilities across different environments, cultural perceptions of social traits, and the perspectives taken in different definitions (e.g., medical or educational). Several specialized organizations and committees have provided definitions, such as the federal definition and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities definition.

The Guide for Learning Disabilities Teachers in Elementary Schools (Ministry of Education, 2020) defines learning disabilities as "disorders in one or more of the basic psychological processes, including attention, perception, memory, thinking, language, and motor coordination." These disorders affect the understanding and use of spoken or written language and manifest as difficulties in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing (spelling, composition, handwriting), and mathematics. These difficulties are not due to intellectual, auditory, or visual disabilities, nor are they caused by external learning conditions or family upbringing.

2. Types of Learning Disabilities

One of the most widely recognized classifications of learning disabilities worldwide is the one proposed by Kirk & Calvert (1988), which categorizes learning disabilities into two main groups:

A. Developmental Learning Disabilities

These disabilities are related to fundamental cognitive (psychological) processes, including:

- Cognitive difficulties, such as attention, perception, memory, and thinking (which includes differentiation, concepts, reasoning, and problem-solving).
- Language difficulties, including phonological awareness, syntax, semantics, social language use, and auditory reception.
- Visual-motor difficulties, involving gross motor coordination, fine motor skills, and general coordination.

Primary developmental learning disabilities (attention, perception, and memory) contribute to secondary developmental learning disabilities (thinking, language, and motor coordination). These developmental difficulties often lead to academic learning disabilities.

B. Academic Learning Disabilities

These involve difficulties in school-related cognitive performance and are closely linked to developmental learning disabilities (Shadi, 2020). They include difficulties in reading, writing, and mathematics and typically become apparent during school years.

3. Characteristics of Students with Learning Disabilities

The Guide for Learning Disabilities Teachers in Elementary Schools (Ministry of Education, 2020) outlines key characteristics of students with learning disabilities, categorized into academic and cognitive characteristics:

(1) Academic Characteristics

- Reading difficulties: Problems with phonological awareness, letter reversal, and difficulty in recognizing letter-sound relationships.
- Writing difficulties: Poor handwriting, slow writing speed, and trouble copying text.
- Mathematical difficulties: Inability to understand abstract numbers, challenges in quantitative reasoning, and difficulty grasping number concepts.

(2) Cognitive Characteristics

- Attention problems: Struggles with maintaining focus, shifting between ideas, and following sequences of information.
- Memory deficits: Rapid forgetting, difficulty recalling auditory or visual information.
- Perception issues: Inability to respond immediately to questions despite knowing the answers, difficulty in spatial coordination, and fine motor skills challenges.
- Thinking difficulties: Impulsiveness, lack of deep comprehension, and resistance to critical thinking.

- Oral language difficulties: Struggles with expressing thoughts, following verbal instructions, and distinguishing between similar words.

4. Causes of Learning Disabilities

The causes of learning disabilities are attributed to brain function irregularities affecting specific cognitive abilities, such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Mohammed, 2020). Research suggests that learning disabilities cannot be attributed to a single cause, and multiple factors contribute to their development, including:

1. Genetic Factors: Studies suggest that brain function irregularities may be inherited, potentially leading to learning disabilities (Al-Hawamdeh, 2019).
2. Biological Factors: Many specialists believe that learning disabilities result from central nervous system dysfunctions, which have been identified using modern medical imaging techniques (Bousif, 2019).
3. Environmental Factors: These include prenatal influences (such as maternal nutrition and health), home environment, social interactions, and educational experiences, all of which can impact learning (Al-Qahtani & Metwally, 2016).

2.2 Inclusive Education

1. Definition of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a continuous process aimed at providing education for all students while respecting diversity, individual needs, and abilities. It involves using appropriate teaching methods, designing behavioral programs, and implementing strategies that support individual learning without discrimination (Ghoneim, 2018).

2. History of Inclusive Education in Saudi Arabia

Inclusive education emerged as a response to major shifts in special education, emphasizing the importance of integrating students with disabilities into general education curricula. Saudi Arabia adopted the concept of inclusive education through initiatives such as the Future Inclusive School project in 2005, which was initially piloted in select schools in Riyadh. The implementation of inclusive education was later expanded under the King Abdullah Project in collaboration with the World Bank, leading to the gradual nationwide adoption of inclusive practices in 2016 (Akhder, 2017).

3. Key Components of Inclusive Education

According to Al-Thawadi (2022), essential components of inclusive education include:

- Accessible school infrastructure
- Curriculum access and differentiation
- Support from teaching assistants
- Administrative and parental support
- Teacher competencies

4. Principles of Inclusive Education

There are three fundamental principles that every educational institution in Saudi Arabia must implement regarding inclusive education:

1. All Children Belong:

Inclusive education is based on the idea that every student and their family have the right to equal educational opportunities and learning experiences. This principle particularly emphasizes the participation of students with disabilities in all school activities and social interactions, fostering friendships that support their development.

2. Every Student Learns Differently:

Inclusive education supports diverse learning methods. Some students may benefit from teacher assistance, peer support, or advanced technologies to facilitate learning.

3. Every Student Has the Right to Be Included in Education: Inclusion is a fundamental right for all students, including those with disabilities, ensuring they receive their education alongside their peers without exclusion (Inclusive Education, 2015).

Al-Salem (2016) also highlights three essential principles for designing a proactive curriculum that addresses diversity in classrooms and helps teachers accommodate individual differences:

- Providing multiple means of engagement to motivate students and cater to their learning preferences.
- Offering various ways to present information to accommodate different learning styles.
- Ensuring multiple methods for students to express their understanding, supporting diverse ways of learning and assessment.

6. The Role of Teachers in Inclusive Education

Teachers play a crucial role in inclusive education, with their responsibilities categorized into three key areas:

1. Co-Teaching (Joint Instruction): Co-teaching involves collaboration between general education teachers, who are knowledgeable in subject content, and special education teachers, who are skilled in adapting instruction for students with disabilities. This partnership improves classroom management and facilitates inclusive teaching.

2. Differentiated Instruction: This approach tailors instruction to accommodate students' varying abilities and prior knowledge, ensuring each student receives appropriate support to maximize learning outcomes.

3. Individualized Instruction: This method involves designing personalized learning plans for students with disabilities, particularly those who require Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) to address their specific needs.

7. Facilities in Inclusive Schools: According to Tatweer Educational Services Company (2018), inclusive schools must meet the following four essential facility standards (as cited in Al-Qahtani & Rababah, 2019):

1. Safe and Accessible Environments:

Schools should provide safe, easily accessible facilities for all students, staff, and visitors. Universal design principles should be incorporated to ensure accessibility, along with necessary environmental modifications for students with disabilities.

2. Supportive Learning Environments:

Beyond safety and accessibility, schools should enhance their facilities to accommodate students with diverse learning needs. Classroom environments should be designed to promote interaction and engagement.

3. Adaptability of Learning Spaces:

Inclusive schools must continuously assess and modify their environments to meet evolving student needs, integrating new technologies and updated educational standards as necessary.

4. The Environment as the “Third Teacher”:

The physical design of learning spaces significantly influences student learning, behavior, and interactions. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, the concept of the "third teacher" emphasizes that well-designed educational environments play an active role in the learning process.

8. Legal Frameworks Supporting Inclusive Education

Several legal frameworks and national policies support the implementation of inclusive education in Saudi Arabia, including:

- Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes empowering individuals with disabilities by ensuring equal access to education and employment opportunities.
- The National Transformation Program 2020, which aims to expand inclusive education services, increasing the number of students with disabilities benefiting from such programs from 58,000 to 200,000.

After reviewing the theoretical framework on learning disabilities and inclusive education, it becomes evident that inclusive education contributes to the academic and social development of all students, including those with learning disabilities.

Literature review:

Recent research has increasingly focused on the practical and systemic challenges associated with implementing inclusive education, particularly for students with learning disabilities (LD) in the Saudi context. These studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of teachers and the barriers they encounter in inclusive settings. For example, a study by Al-Momani and Al-Momani (2022) investigated the perspectives of general and special education teachers in Saudi Arabia regarding the services provided to students with learning disabilities. Using a mixed-method approach, the study revealed several barriers to effective inclusion, including an inappropriate curriculum, limited parental involvement, lack of administrative support, and insufficient training for teachers. These findings emphasize the need for coordinated efforts to improve instructional strategies and school-family collaboration. Similarly, Alnahdi (2023) examined teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in Saudi public schools and found that general education teachers often feel unprepared to support students with disabilities. The study highlighted that while teachers support the concept of inclusion in principle, the lack of training and classroom resources significantly hinders its implementation. The author called for continuous professional development and systemic reforms to enhance inclusion practices.

In a large-scale study on teacher burnout in inclusive classrooms, Alshammari et al. (2024) found that special education teachers in inclusive schools experience high levels of emotional exhaustion, particularly those working with students who are deaf or hard of

hearing. The study emphasized the urgent need to address teacher workload, provide emotional support, and implement sustainable inclusion strategies. Further, a study by Alqahtani (2023) focused on general education teachers in Jeddah and their attitudes toward inclusion. The findings revealed that many teachers lacked both confidence and knowledge in adapting teaching methods to support students with disabilities. The study recommended that policymakers prioritize teacher training and create supportive school environments to ensure successful inclusion. Finally, a critical review by Alsulaimani (2022) examined the broader societal and institutional challenges that hinder inclusive education practices in Saudi Arabia. The study identified a lack of technical knowledge among teachers, insufficient community awareness, and resistance to inclusion as key obstacles. The author proposed increasing public awareness and strengthening interprofessional collaboration as pathways to address these barriers.

Methodology and methods:

To gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges learning disabilities teachers face in implementing inclusive education for female students with learning disabilities, this study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretive framework. This approach was chosen for its ability to explore the nuanced, context-dependent experiences of participants and to capture the meaning they assign to their teaching practices, institutional roles, and interactions with students, families, and school leadership (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive paradigm was particularly suitable for this research, as it acknowledges that teachers' perspectives are shaped by their everyday experiences within specific educational, cultural, and administrative contexts (Tracy, 2020). The study sought to explore not only the instructional barriers teachers encounter but also the broader systemic and social factors that affect inclusive education efforts.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 special and general education teachers working in public schools in Khamis Mushayt city in Saudi Arabia. These schools serve female students with learning disabilities who are integrated into general education classrooms. The interview format allowed for both consistency across core topics and flexibility to follow individual teachers' insights and experiences in depth. This methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of the instructional, institutional, and interpersonal challenges reported by teachers, as well as the factors they perceive to support or hinder inclusive education. The findings aim to inform future improvements in teacher preparation, school policy, and inclusive education practices within the Saudi educational system.

Participants

The study involved eleven female teachers both general education and special teachers working in public schools implementing inclusive education programs (Table 1). A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants with direct experience in teaching female students with learning disabilities within inclusive classrooms. The sample included a mix of general education teachers and learning disabilities teachers to capture a comprehensive view of the practical realities of inclusion from both instructional perspectives. All participants consented voluntarily to take part in the study and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. False names were used to protect their identities in the reporting of findings.

Table (1): Participant Information

Teachers	Type of Education
Mona	General Education Teacher
Waad	Special Education Teacher
Asmaa	General Education Teacher
Huda	Special Education Teacher
Rania	General Education Teacher
Lujain	Special Education Teacher
Salma	General Education Teacher
Reem	Special Education Teacher
Dana	General Education Teacher
Noura	Special Education Teacher
Abeer	Special Education Teacher

Data Analysis

The data were examined using thematic analysis, guided by the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following the verbatim transcription of the semi-structured interviews, the researcher engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve a deep understanding of the content. From this immersion, initial codes were developed to identify key ideas and patterns related to teachers' views on family awareness and participation in support services. These codes were then grouped into overarching themes that captured both the enabling factors and the barriers to family engagement. The themes underwent multiple rounds of refinement to ensure clarity, coherence, and accurate representation of the participants' narratives, supported by illustrative quotes from the interviews. Manual coding techniques were applied throughout the process to facilitate the systematic organization of the data. This method allowed the researcher to capture both commonalities and individual variations within the participants' responses, ensuring that the resulting findings were authentically rooted in their real-life professional experiences and offered valuable implications for educational policy and practice.

Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by learning disabilities teachers in implementing inclusive education for female students with learning disabilities in public schools in the Aseer region. Through semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers, the thematic analysis revealed several interrelated challenges that impede effective inclusion. While some barriers were specific to general education or learning disabilities teachers, others such as lack of family awareness were consistently emphasized across both groups. These findings are discussed below in relation to the existing literature.

1. Challenges Faced by General Education Teachers**A. Time Constraints**

A prominent theme among general education teachers was the lack of sufficient time to support students with learning disabilities effectively. Teachers reported that the standard 45-minute lesson period does not allow for the necessary repetition, reinforcement, or individualized instruction that these students often require. One teacher noted that it was "impossible" to provide meaningful support within the allocated time, particularly when

trying to balance the needs of an entire class. Another emphasized that “the curriculum is too dense and misaligned with the time available.” This finding aligns with research by Al-Momani and Al-Momani (2022), who found that time constraints significantly hinder teachers' ability to implement individualized strategies in inclusive classrooms. Similarly, Alqahtani (2023) emphasized the need for time extensions or adapted teaching models to accommodate diverse learning needs in Saudi public schools.

B. Inadequate Professional Preparation

General education teachers also reported insufficient training and lack of specialization as major obstacles to inclusion. Several indicated that they were assigned to teach outside their university specialization, leaving them unprepared to address the needs of students with learning disabilities. One participant explained: “I majored in Home Economics, but I am asked to teach any subject, including those that require adaptation for students with learning difficulties.” This mirrors findings by Alnahdi (2023), who identified a lack of teacher preparation and training as a primary barrier to inclusion in Saudi Arabia. Teachers often lack knowledge of differentiated instruction, classroom accommodations, and behavioral support—key components of inclusive practice (Alshammari et al., 2024).

C. Overcrowded Classrooms

Classroom overcrowding emerged as another significant challenge. Teachers described teaching in rooms with 30 to 50 students, making it nearly impossible to provide targeted support to students with learning disabilities. One teacher highlighted that “instead of supporting students with learning difficulties, such environments increase their distractions and reduce engagement.” This finding is consistent with the work of Alsulaimani (2022), who reported that high student-to-teacher ratios in Saudi public schools contribute to reduced instructional quality and heightened teacher stress in inclusive settings. Alshammari et al. (2024) also emphasized that overcrowding exacerbates burnout and limits the efficacy of even well-trained educators.

2. Challenges Faced by Learning Disabilities Teachers

A. Psychological Challenges Among Students

Teachers specializing in learning disabilities pointed to the emotional and psychological difficulties experienced by their students. These include low self-esteem, reluctance to participate in learning disabilities programs, and social isolation—often due to bullying or negative peer attitudes. One teacher explained that some students “refuse to attend the support room because they are mocked or labeled by their peers.” This finding is supported by Alqahtani (2023), who reported that students with learning disabilities often feel stigmatized, which affects their motivation and engagement. Social acceptance within the classroom is essential for inclusion to succeed (Alnahdi, 2023), and when absent, even well-designed instructional strategies may prove ineffective. A general education teacher, drawing from previous experience in counseling, noted that “even academically capable students may struggle if they lack friendship or emotional support,” highlighting the importance of a nurturing social environment.

B. Societal Misconceptions and Cultural Attitudes

Another barrier reported by teachers was the lack of societal awareness about learning disabilities. Teachers expressed concern that negative stereotypes and misunderstandings persist within the broader school culture and community. One stated, “Society views these students as less capable. This perception needs to change.” This observation reflects broader trends in Saudi Arabia, as discussed in Alsulaimani (2022), where cultural beliefs about disability continue to shape resistance to inclusion. The stigma associated with special education often leads to low expectations for students and poor collaboration among stakeholders.

3. A Shared Challenge: Lack of Family Awareness and Involvement

A recurring theme across both groups of teachers was the lack of parental awareness regarding learning disabilities and inclusive education. Teachers reported that many families either refuse to enroll their daughters in learning disabilities programs or fail to participate in the educational process. One teacher explained, “Parents want high grades, but they are not involved. They don’t understand the importance of working with the school.” Another participant shared that some families reject specialized support out of fear that their child will be labeled as having a disability. “They are worried about social stigma,” one teacher said, “and that ignorance causes them to resist services that could help their daughters.” These findings are consistent with those of Al-Momani and Al-Momani (2022) and Alshammari et al. (2024), who identified lack of family engagement as a key impediment to inclusive success. Parental cooperation is essential for continuity of support between school and home, yet misconceptions and cultural taboos often limit such collaboration.

Conclusion and Implications

Overall, the findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted challenges that hinder inclusive education for students with learning disabilities in Saudi public schools. General education teachers face structural and pedagogical limitations, including inadequate training, time constraints, and overcrowded classrooms. Meanwhile, learning disabilities teachers encounter psychosocial barriers stemming from peer attitudes, cultural misconceptions, and insufficient community awareness. Crucially, both groups agreed that family awareness and involvement remain underdeveloped despite being essential to successful inclusion. This reflects a pressing need for school-based family education programs, targeted teacher training, and systemic changes in policy and infrastructure to support inclusive practices. These findings support and extend existing research and emphasize the need for a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to build inclusive, responsive, and effective educational environments.

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