EXPLORING PRESERVICE TEACHERS' AFFECTIVE AND BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSES TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores preservice teachers' perceptions of inclusive education (IE), focusing on their preparedness, challenges, and emotional and behavioural responses during practicum, as well as strategies that support effective inclusion. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six preservice teachers and analysed thematically across two key domains: affective and behavioural. The affective domain highlights preservice teachers' emotions, attitudes, and values toward IE, while the behavioural domain addresses instructional practices such as differentiated instruction, peer support, and use of assistive technologies. Findings reveal themes including emotional preparedness, communication challenges, instructional adaptation, and classroom management. Although participants demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusion, many feel unprepared to manage classroom dynamics and engage students with special educational needs (SEN), particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or hearing impairments. The study underscores the need for experiential learning in teacher education programmes and improved support systems to enhance effective and behavioural competencies in inclusive settings. Despite limitations such as small sample size and reliance on self-reports, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusive teacher training and offers practical recommendations for future research and practice. These limitations were acknowledged to maintain transparency in the findings and to suggest future research directions using triangulation and a broader sample base.

Keywords: Inclusive education, preservice teachers, affective, behavioural, practicum, special educational needs

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are central to the success of inclusive education (IE), and their preparedness is critical in ensuring that students with special educational needs (SEN) are effectively supported. Inclusive education promotes learning environments where all students, regardless of ability, learn together. This approach aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2023). When teachers are trained and

empowered to adopt inclusive practices, they contribute to a more equitable and accessible educational system.

Inclusive education is rooted in the belief that education is a fundamental human right and a vehicle for achieving a more just society (Troll et al., 2019). According to Mohalik (2024), inclusive education involves educating all children together in the same classrooms and schools while providing meaningful learning opportunities for historically marginalised groups, such as children with disabilities and linguistic minorities. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994; reaffirmed in 2024) articulates the global consensus that schools must accommodate all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, or linguistic differences.

This study further investigates inclusive education through two primary lenses: affective and behavioural domains. The affective domain includes emotions, values, and attitudes that influence preservice teachers' willingness to embrace inclusion. As described by Netzer et al. (2018), the affective component reflects emotional responses, such as empathy and anxiety, which can affect inclusive teaching practices. The behavioural domain pertains to the concrete actions and strategies used by preservice teachers, such as differentiated instruction and classroom management techniques, to facilitate inclusive learning. According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993, as cited in Netzer et al., 2018), behavioural responses signal either acceptance or avoidance of inclusive practices based on underlying attitudes.

While prior research has emphasised attitudes, self-efficacy, and practicum experiences as key influences on preservice teachers' readiness for inclusive classrooms (Massouti, 2021; Puliatte et al., 2021; Sharma & Sokal, 2016), gaps remain in understanding how affective dispositions interact with actual behaviours. Many preservice teachers still report feeling underprepared, particularly in addressing the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and communication problems. This study addresses this gap by exploring both emotional and practical responses of preservice teachers during their practicum experiences.

The aim of this study is to examine how preservice teachers' affective dispositions and behavioural strategies converge to shape their preparedness for inclusive education. It seeks to contribute to the teacher education discourse by offering insights into how training programmes can better support the development of inclusive mindsets and practices among future educators.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) by Ajzen (1991), which posits that intention to perform a behaviour is influenced by three key components: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. The affective domain in this study corresponds to the preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, while the behavioural domain reflects their perceived control and intentions manifested through their teaching strategies. TPB serves as a relevant framework to understand how emotional dispositions and external influences translate into inclusive teaching practices.

Additionally, this study adopts a conceptual framework that integrates both affective and behavioural dimensions of teacher preparedness for inclusive education. The framework conceptualises teacher preparedness as a dynamic interplay between emotional readiness (empathy, confidence, patience) and actionable competence (instructional strategies, classroom management, collaboration). This dual-focus framework guides data collection, thematic categorisation, and interpretation of findings, emphasising that both domains are essential for fostering inclusive practices among preservice teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in a growing body of research emphasising the need for inclusive teacher education that promotes both affective understanding and behavioural competence. Positive attitudes, self-efficacy, and practical experience are crucial factors in preparing preservice teachers for inclusive classrooms (Massouti, 2021; Puliatte et al., 2021; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). Massouti (2021) emphasised

the role of field-based mentoring and collaborative mindsets in enhancing inclusion efforts, while Puliatte et al. (2021) found that engagement with students with disabilities increases preservice teachers' confidence and openness to inclusion.

The affective domain is particularly vital. Netzer et al. (2018) distinguish between emotional responses and cognitive understanding, underscoring the importance of developing empathy, patience, and resilience among preservice teachers. Lautenbach and Heyder (2020) demonstrated that preservice teachers who engaged in experiential learning reported lower stress and more positive attitudes toward inclusion compared to those who received only theoretical instruction.

In terms of the behavioural domain, Troll et al. (2019) highlighted the benefits of subject-specific training that enables teachers to adapt instruction for diverse learners. Techniques such as differentiated instruction, multisensory learning, and the use of assistive technologies have been proven to be effective in managing diverse classrooms (Mohalik, 2024).

Despite these findings, gaps remain in understanding the interplay between emotional preparedness and practical application. Moreover, few studies in the Malaysian context have explored how these factors are experienced during practicum. This study aims to address these gaps by examining both affective and behavioural domains from the perspective of Malaysian preservice teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants in this study were six preservice teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education programme at the Institute of Teacher Education in Malaysia. They were selected using purposive sampling based on their practicum experience in inclusive classrooms in mainstream primary schools. This small sample size is consistent with qualitative research principles aimed at depth of insight rather than generalisability, allowing for rich, contextual understanding of each participant's experience.

Data Collection Methods

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore preservice teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, with specific focus on their affective and behavioural responses. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit information about participants' preparedness for inclusion, the challenges they encountered, and the instructional strategies they employed during their practicum. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to confidentiality, and their voluntary participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. An inductive approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the affective and behavioural aspects of inclusive education. The analysis process involved several stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

RESULTS AND FINDING

This study examines preservice teachers' perspectives on inclusive education (IE), with a particular focus on their affective and behavioural responses during practicum. The findings highlight three key themes within each domain. In the affective domain, preservice teachers reported challenges related to emotional preparedness, communication difficulties, and shifts in attitude, reflecting their experiences and evolving understanding of working with students with special educational needs (SEN). Similarly, in the behavioural domain, prominent themes included instructional adaptation, classroom management, and collaborative strategies, showcasing the various approaches preservice teachers implemented to create an inclusive learning environment.

Affective Domain

Three key themes emerged: emotional preparedness, communication challenges, and shifts in attitude.

Preservice teachers recognised that patience, empathy, and adaptability were essential when working with students with special educational needs (SEN). However, many reported feelings unprepared to manage the complexities of inclusive education. As Participant 1 noted, "You need a lot of patience to handle a child with a disability," while Participant 5 acknowledged initial uncertainty but emphasised the importance of perseverance: "I felt unsure at first how to approach them, but I knew I had to stay patient."Several participants expressed frustration with communication barriers and the difficulty of engaging SEN students. Participant 6 shared, " I truly felt very disappointed because the message I was trying to convey was not fully understood." Similarly, Participant 3 stated, " At first, I felt disappointed because it was difficult to convey instructions." These challenges highlight the need for better training in effective communication and engagement strategies for inclusive classrooms.

Despite these challenges, preservice teachers demonstrated strong empathy toward SEN students. Participant 1 shared, "It's sad, and I worry if they can catch up with the lessons." In addition, Participant 2 stressed the importance of maintaining a calm and supportive classroom environment, stating, "Maintaining a calm and controlled classroom environment made a big difference." These reflections underscore the importance of professional development programmes that focus on both instructional strategies and emotional preparedness.

Behavioural Domain

Instructional adaptation, classroom management, and collaborative strategies were prominent themes.

Differentiated instruction emerged as a key strategy in supporting SEN students. Preservice teachers implemented flexible teaching methods, as noted by Participant 1, "Allow flexibility. If a child doesn't want to work in a group, I let them work individually." Similarly, Participant 6 emphasised the importance of using diverse instructional materials: "Differentiated instruction is key offering materials in multiple formats."

Managing an inclusive classroom was a significant challenge for preservice teachers. Participants used structured routines, peer-assisted learning, and individualised approaches to create a supportive learning environment. As Participant 2 stated, "Routine helped me to maintain classroom control when the student was hyperactive," while Participant 5 highlighted the effectiveness of peer support, "Assigning a buddy helps them regulate their behaviour."

Collaboration with students and peers played a crucial role in facilitating inclusive education. Participants used alternative communication strategies, including visual aids, gestures, and structured routines. Participant 6 explained, " I took the initiative to use facial expressions and body gestures." while Participant 3 adapted by using written instructions, "I overcame it by using hand signals and

writing on the whiteboard." These findings suggest the need for structured training on communication techniques tailored to diverse learning needs.

Table 1: Affective Responses of Preservice Teachers towards Inclusive Education

Theme	Participant	Quotation
Emotional Preparedness	Participant 1	"You need a lot of patience to handle a child with disability."
	Participant 2	"The biggest challenge was classroom control—he was very active and struggled to follow instructions."
	Participant 5	"I felt unsure at first how to approach them, but I knew I had to stay patient."
Communication Challenges	Participant 6	"I truly felt very disappointed because the message I was trying to convey was not fully understood."
	Participant 3	"At first, I felt disappointed because it was difficult to convey instructions."
	Participant 4	"Sometimes I feel frustrated because I cannot give the same attention to everyone."
Attitudinal Shifts	Participant 2	"Maintaining a calm and controlled classroom environment made a big difference."
	Participant 5	"I want them to feel safe and accepted in my class."
	Participant 4	"I always try to understand their struggles."

Table 2: Behavioural Strategies of Preservice Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

Theme	Participant	Quotation
Instructional Adaptation	Participant 1	"Allow flexibility. If a child doesn't want to work in a group, I let them work individually."
	Participant 6	"Differentiated instruction is key—offering materials in multiple formats."
	Participant 3	"I gave the student a visual schedule and individual tasks first, before gradually including them in small group activities."
	Participant 2	"Structure and routine help maintain focus."
	Participant 5	"Peer support is key. Assigning a peer buddy has worked well in my classroom."
	Participant 4	"Group activities and game-based learning ensure that all students stay engaged."
Classroom Management	Participant 1	"I let them watch a video if it helps calm them down and continue teaching the others."

Participant 6	"Involving their classmates who knew how to communicate with them was effective."
Participant 3	"I allowed the student to complete tasks individually to help build their confidence"
Participant 2	"Routine helped me to maintain classroom control when the student was hyperactive."
Participant 5	"Assigning a buddy helps them regulate their behaviour."
Participant 4	"I make sure to divide tasks, so the student is not left behind."

DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussions

The findings of the present study provide an advanced understanding of preservice teachers' emotional and behavioural responses to inclusive education (IE) during their practicum experience. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes in each domain: emotional readiness, communication challenges, and attitude change in the affective domain, and instructional adaptation, classroom management strategies, and collaborative strategies in the behavioural domain. These findings are consistent with what is already known while also providing an important insight into how preservice teachers experience the challenges of inclusive classrooms.

In the affective domain, emotional readiness was a recurring concern for participants. Teachers stressed the need to show patience and flexibility when working with students with special educational needs (SEN). This result aligns with Lautenbach and Heyder (2020), who noted that teachers' perceptions of stress have a strong influence on their attitude toward inclusion. The respondents also complained about frustrations arising from communication obstacles, especially when the attempts they made to involve students were not completely comprehended. This follows the results from Massouti (2021), which highlight the need to prepare preservice teachers with how they could overcome the obstacles. Furthermore, changes in attitude could be observed as participants expressed empathy and a desire to create safe and inclusive environments for all students. This supports the sentiments of Puliatte et al. (2021) that highlight affirmative attitudes as fundamental to effective inclusion.

Within the behaviour domain, the adaptation of instructional methods surfaced as a significant theme. Respondents utilised various strategies including differentiated teaching, visual resources, and peer assistance to address the varying learning requirements. These practices are supported by Troll et al. (2019), who demonstrated that subject-specific opportunities to learn make a significant contribution to adaptability in preservice teachers. Control in the classroom was a very prominent issue, with students emphasising the importance of routine and structure in exerting control and including students with SEN. Collective approaches, such as the use of multisensory resources and non-verbal signals, were also found to be very effective in promoting inclusion.

The implications of these results are far-reaching. Primarily, they emphasised the importance of teacher preparation programmes to incorporate experiential learning experiences, so that preservice teachers can hone their hands-on skills in authentic settings. Systematic practice in the field under the supervision of experienced mentors can successfully bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice, as highlighted through research conducted by Lautenbach and Heyder (2020) and Massouti (2021). The study also highlights the necessity to prepare preservice teachers in communication strategies adapted to the diversified needs of learners. Finally, it centres on the development of empathy and positive attitudes through reflective practices and specific intervention. Specifically, the findings support the need for policy reform that embeds inclusive education practices in national teacher training modules. Training providers are encouraged to adopt modules on inclusive communication, scenario-based simulations, and SEN mentorship opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends several directions for future research. First, larger and more diverse samples across multiple teacher education institutes should be considered to improve the generalisability of the findings. Second, future studies should combine self-reported data with other methods, such as classroom observations or mentor feedback, to minimise bias and provide a more comprehensive understanding of preservice teachers' experiences. Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to examine how preservice teachers' attitudes and practices towards inclusive education develop over time. Finally, future studies should explore the effectiveness of specific training modules or practical experiences in strengthening both the affective and behavioural preparedness of preservice teachers for inclusive classrooms.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study was able to achieve its objective through the exploration of Malaysian preservice teachers' affective and behavioural reactions to inclusive education throughout the practicum experience. Findings highlight both the emotional challenges and the instructional strategies employed by participants. The study underscores the need for teacher education programmes to integrate experiential learning, mentorship, and targeted communication training to better equip teachers to construct inclusive learning environments.

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