# INCLUSIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN MANAGING CLASSROOMS WITH DIVERSE LEARNING NEEDS

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# **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to critically examine teachers' experiences in building character education in inclusive classes inhabited by students with diverse learning needs. Using a qualitative approach with a literature review method, this study analyzed national and international scientific articles published between 2021 and 2025. Thematic analysis was used to identify experiences, strategies, and supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of inclusive character education. The results of the study indicate that teachers act as facilitators of values and moral agents who shape students' character through contextual approaches, local culture, habituation, and collaborative projects. The success of implementation is greatly influenced by structural support, a conducive school culture, and the involvement of the educational community. On the other hand, limited resources, lack of teacher training, and low parental involvement are the main obstacles. These findings emphasize the importance of reflective pedagogical practices, adaptive internal policies, and cross-sector collaboration as the foundation for inclusive and transformative character education.

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# **INTRODUCTIONS**

Inclusive education provides space for all students, including those with diverse learning needs, to learn together equally in regular classrooms. This education model emphasizes the principle of justice and equal access to decent educational services without discrimination, in accordance with global mandates such as *Education for All* and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Within this framework, the success of inclusive education is measured not only by the physical integration of students with special needs, but also by their active involvement in the meaningful learning process with peers. According to (Filippou dkk., 2025) states that sustainable inclusive education depends on strong support systems in schools, including adaptive curriculum, inclusion policies, and teacher competencies. At the elementary school level, classroom teachers have an important role in managing a



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heterogeneous learning process, in which students present with cognitive, social, and emotional differences. Research by (Tuhuteru et al., 2023) It shows that the active role of teachers greatly determines the extent to which character education values such as empathy, tolerance, and responsibility can be transformed in inclusive classroom situations. Thus, it is important to critically examine how character education can be constructed and managed by teachers in the context of inclusive classrooms. This understanding is not only relevant to strengthen equitable pedagogical practices, but also to ensure that all students acquire learning experiences that support the formation of universal human character and values.

In the context of inclusive education, teachers have a complex role, which is not only accommodating students' academic needs, but also instilling character values such as tolerance, responsibility, and empathy. Inclusive classes present a high diversity of both cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically which requires teachers to manage the learning process in an adaptive and responsive manner to individual differences. At the same time, character education cannot be separated from the goal of inclusive education, because the success of the integration of students with special needs also depends heavily on the creation of a morally and socially inclusive classroom climate. Research by (Dalgaard dkk., 2022) It shows that an inclusive approach that only emphasizes the academic aspect without strengthening social character risks failing to realize the long-term goal of inclusive education. Meanwhile, research by (Singh & Pallai, 2023) emphasizing that character-building strategies such as empathy and responsibility in inclusive classrooms have been shown to increase student participation and reduce social tension between individuals. Thus, it is important to critically examine how teachers manage inclusive classrooms not only from an academic perspective, but also in instilling character values. This research aims to explore teachers' experiences in implementing character education strategies in the midst of diverse learning needs, which will provide important insights for the development of holistic and equitable inclusive pedagogical practices.

A major challenge arises when character values must be formed in cognitive, emotional, and socially heterogeneous classroom contexts, such as in an inclusive educational environment. The diversity of students' abilities and backgrounds in an inclusive classroom demands a pedagogical approach that not only adapts learning methods, but also how to effectively instill values such as empathy, responsibility, and tolerance in all students. Character formation in an inclusive classroom requires teachers' sensitivity in dealing with differences, as well as strategies that are able to create a fair, supportive, and participatory classroom climate for all students. Research by (Lindner dkk., 2023) shows that teachers' attitudes towards diversity greatly affect the effectiveness of character education in inclusive classrooms. Meanwhile, (Vantieghem dkk., 2023) Finding that teachers' competence in understanding and responding to individual student needs is a key element in building an academically and socially inclusive classroom culture. Other findings by (Shutaleva dkk., 2023) emphasizing that the success of students' character in an inclusive context is greatly influenced by teachers' ability to build social relations and humanistic differentiation strategies. Therefore, it is important to critically examine how teachers develop character-building strategies in inclusive classrooms full of diversity. This research will explore teachers' experiences in managing these challenges and contribute to the development of adaptive, responsive, and equitable character education practices.

Although character education and inclusive education have been extensively studied separately, there is still very little research that specifically highlights teachers' experiences in integrating the two in classroom practice. Character education is often discussed in a general context without taking into account the complexity of inclusive classes, even though the diversity of students' learning needs demands a more adaptive and contextual approach to character building. On the other hand, studies of inclusive education focus more on pedagogical strategies to meet the academic needs of students with special needs, rather than on the dimensions of their social and emotional character. Systematic review by (Dalgaard dkk., 2022) It shows that although inclusion has been shown to have a positive impact on the social-emotional aspects of students, most studies have not explored the role of teachers in instilling character values explicitly. Meanwhile, a study by (Lindner dkk., 2023) confirms that teachers' perceptions of inclusion are more technical than the moral values that accompany them. This shows that there is a research gap in understanding



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the integration between academic function and character building in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a critical review of the literature that specifically reviews how teachers' experiences in building students' character through strategies applied in inclusive classrooms. This research is important to answer the study gap at the intersection between character education and inclusive education from the perspective of teachers' professional practice.

Until now, there are still limited studies that systematically review teachers' practices, challenges, and strategies in shaping students' character in the context of inclusive education. The study of character education tends to be general and does not touch on the complexity of reality in inclusive classrooms, in which there is a diversity of learning needs, social backgrounds, and cognitive capacity of students. In contrast, research on inclusive education focuses more on aspects of physical accessibility, policy, or pedagogical differentiation, but has not specifically explored the integration of character values in teaching practice. Research (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024) In his literature review, it is shown that the main challenge in inclusive education lies in the lack of pedagogical strategies that are able to combine academic needs and character formation at the same time. Meanwhile, (Atanasova & Papen, 2025) found that although university lecturers in the UK adopted a range of inclusive practices, their approach to character values was still highly dependent on personal understanding and was not structured in the learning system. These two studies confirm that the issue of integration between inclusion and character has not yet become a major focus in the global research agenda. Therefore, a critical study is needed that highlights the direct experience of teachers in managing inclusive classrooms, especially in shaping students' character contextually and applicatively. This research aims to fill this gap by compiling a thematic map of teachers' practices and reflections as the main actors of inclusive character education.

This research aims to critically examine literature that focuses on the role of teachers in shaping character education in inclusive classrooms. In the context of diverse learning needs, teachers face complex pedagogical challenges in effectively instilling character values such as tolerance, responsibility, and empathy. A systematic study is needed to identify the teacher's real experience, the strategies used, as well as the factors that support and inhibit the implementation of character education in inclusive classrooms. Research by (Singh & Pallai, 2023) emphasizing the importance of differentiation strategies and humanistic learning in fostering the character of students in heterogeneous classes, while (Atanasova & Papen, 2025) It shows that inclusive practices that are not accompanied by a value approach will tend to lose their social-moral dimension. Therefore, this article aims to: 1) Examine teachers' experiences in shaping students' character in inclusive classrooms, 2) Identify strategies used to convey character values to students with diverse learning needs and 3) Analyze supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of character education in an inclusive environment.

Several previous studies have made important contributions to the understanding of inclusive education and character education, but not many have reviewed the integration of the two in depth. Research (Singh & Pallai, 2023) In its literature review, it emphasizes that the success of character education in inclusive classrooms is determined by differentiatory and participatory teaching strategies, especially in building empathy and social responsibility. Research (Shutaleva dkk., 2023) It shows that teachers' psychological and professional readiness greatly affects their ability to deal with student diversity and instill human values. Meanwhile, (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024) reveals that although inclusive education has become a global policy, its implementation is still often stuck on technical aspects such as accessibility, while the social character dimension has not been explicitly integrated in learning strategies. Research by (Atanasova & Papen, 2025) It also reinforces these findings, stating that although teachers in colleges adopt an inclusive approach, the integration of moral values is still highly dependent on individual initiative and has not yet become a structural part of the curriculum. Thus, this literature review is here to fill this gap by compiling a thematic picture of teachers' experiences in shaping students' characters in inclusive classrooms, including the strategies used and the challenges and opportunities they face.



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This research makes two main contributions. First, it provides a critical synthesis of literature that brings together two important areas: character education and inclusive education. Second, it offers a conceptual framework and practical implications for the development of teachers' competencies in managing inclusive classrooms while shaping students' character. In addition, the results of this study are expected to be strategic inputs for education policymakers in designing training and policy interventions that are more relevant to the needs of diverse classes.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative approach with the literature review method as a form of systematic study of scientific works that discuss character education in an inclusive context. The main purpose of this study is to explore and synthesize empirical and conceptual findings about teachers' experiences in building character education in classrooms that are heterogeneous in terms of learning needs. This type of research is qualitative descriptive with a systematic literature review approach. The research does not focus on collecting field data, but rather critically analyzes documents, journal articles, research reports, and other academic publications relevant to the focus of the study. The main data sources are 61 national and international scientific articles published in the 2021-2025 range. The articles cover the topics: character education, inclusive education, teacher strategies in heterogeneous classrooms, inclusive classroom management, and character education policies. All articles are obtained from reputable journals such as Scopus-indexed journals, Sinta, and other reputable international journals. Data was collected through a systematic search process using keywords such as "inclusive education", "character education", "teacher strategy", "special needs students", and "inclusive classroom management". Selection is made based on inclusion criteria (topic relevance, year of publication, full access, and academic substance) and exclusion (duplication, irrelevance, or nonpeer-reviewed). The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The stages of analysis include: 1) rereading the entire article in depth; 2) identify key themes such as teacher experience, learning strategies, supporting and inhibiting factors; 3) grouping findings into thematic categories; 4) make a critical interpretation of the relationships between themes; and 5) to compile a narrative synthesis based on a conceptual framework built from the literature. To maintain the validity of the results, the strategy of triangulating sources (from various journals and geographical contexts), trail audit (track record of selection and document analysis), and reflective repeated reading was used to minimize researcher bias.

#### RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSION

The results of this literature review produced three main themes that describe teachers' practices, strategies, and challenges in shaping character education in inclusive classrooms.

## Teachers' Experience in Building Character Education in Inclusive Classrooms

Teachers in inclusive classrooms play a key role in building character education through the integration of values in the learning process that is adaptive to the needs of students. Character education in inclusive classrooms not only focuses on regular students, but also requires teachers to understand the characteristics of students with special needs so that values such as responsibility, caring, and tolerance can be instilled effectively. Subjects such as social studies have great potential as a medium for character education because they are full of social and humanitarian values. Research (Azizah & Lestari, 2021) shows that teachers at SMP Negeri 39 Semarang design double lesson plans (for regular students and ABK) and use the *discovery learning* which is adapted to accommodate the needs of inclusive students in social studies learning. With this differentiation approach, teachers are able to create an inclusive and transformative learning space in fostering students' character equally.

The character-building strategies applied by teachers in inclusive classrooms emphasize more on positive habituation and exemplary in daily interactions. Character values are not only taught explicitly, but also instilled through behavioral models shown by teachers in daily life. Teachers are central figures in shaping a supportive and



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ethical classroom atmosphere, especially for students with social or emotional barriers. Findings from (Suri & Chandra, 2021) and (Azizah & Lestari, 2021) shows that habituation through school culture (such as 3S: Smile, Greeting, Greetings), spontaneous activities, and intracurricular and extracurricular activities become an integral part of an effective character-building strategy in the inclusion classroom. Consistent teacher role models strengthen the internalization of values in all students and become the main foundation for the success of character education in an inclusive context.

Teachers face structural and cultural challenges in implementing character education in inclusive classrooms to the maximum. Absence of operational guidance (grand design) Especially for character education in the context of inclusion, it causes teachers to have difficulty in developing systematic and measurable planning. The role of parents in supporting the values instilled in school is still minimal, so the values formed at school are often not sustainable at home. Research (Azizah & Lestari, 2021) stated that some students still show undisciplined behavior due to the lack of assistance from parents and the absence of all character values in the lesson plan. Similar things were also found by (Yulina et al., 2023) that the synergy of schools and parents greatly determines the success of character implementation. Therefore, parental involvement and the preparation of contextually inclusive character education policy documents are urgent needs in strengthening teacher practices.

The evaluation of character education in inclusive classrooms is carried out holistically by teachers with an emphasis on the dimensions of students' attitudes and behaviors. Assessment is directed not only at cognition, but rather at the formation of students' attitudes and social interactions in the context of diversity. Teachers adjust character assessment indicators to be relevant to the abilities and backgrounds of students with special needs. In the findings (Azizah & Lestari, 2021), teachers use attitude observation instruments and reflective notes to assess character achievement, and these assessments are personalized to suit students' emotional and social conditions. This research is in line with (Majid et al., 2023) which emphasizes that a flexible and empathetic approach is key to character evaluation in an inclusive classroom. Therefore, the evaluation of character education in the inclusive classroom must be adaptive, reflective, and respect the student development process, not just the final result.

#### **Character Building Strategies Used by Teachers**

Teachers in inclusive classrooms apply contextual learning strategies to instill character values in a meaningful way. Contextual learning strategies allow students to understand character values through experiences that are relevant to their real lives. In the context of inclusion, this approach helps students with special needs interact socially and recognize values in a concrete way. Research (Kasim et al., 2021) Kasim et al. (2021) found that beginning Islamic Education teachers in Malaysia apply students' life-context-based learning such as group work, case studies, and value reflection to build religious character, responsibility, and leadership naturally. By associating the material with real life, teachers succeed in creating a learning process that is integrated with strengthening the character of inclusive students.

Strengthening character values in inclusive classes is also carried out through local culture-based strategies. Local culture reflects the values of wisdom that teachers can use as a medium of internalizing character. For students with special needs, the culture-based approach provides a sense of identity and emotional closeness that supports the acceptance of values. Research (Islamudin et al., 2023) shows that in SDLBN Kedungkandang, teachers build the character of students with disabilities through local art activities such as traditional dance and painting, which develop religious values, discipline, independence, and love for the homeland. Local culture-based strategies have proven to be effective in shaping the character of students with special needs through ways that are appropriate to their potential and context.

Character building strategies are also strengthened through the creation of a consistent school culture. A repetitive and consistent school culture helps form students' positive behavior habits. In an inclusive class, character-filled routines create a sense of security and predictability for ABK students. Research (Nispiani dkk., 2023) found that kindergartens in Gresik applied character values through daily school culture such as morning prayers, queues,

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5S (smiles, greetings, greetings, politeness, manners), and group activities, which gradually formed the social and moral character of early childhood, including those with special needs. By creating a welcoming and valued school culture, teachers instill character through systematic habituation in an inclusive environment.

Project-based reflective and exploratory strategies are another method that teachers use to strengthen the character of inclusive students. This method encourages active involvement and student responsibility in the learning process that is collaborative and applicative. Students with a wide range of learning needs get the opportunity to demonstrate their strengths in a meaningful social context. Research (Surani et al., 2024) shows that in the context of Madrasah Tsanawiyah, teachers apply a character management approach through religious projects and community-based leadership activities that form values such as empathy, responsibility, and social tolerance among students. With project-based and reflection-based strategies, teachers create learning that empowers all students equally and builds character through real actions.

# Supporting and Inhibiting Factors for the Implementation of Inclusive Character Education

The success of the implementation is greatly influenced by internal and external factors. School policy support, parent involvement, and teacher training are the main supporting factors. Nevertheless, the research (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024) It shows that structural challenges such as time constraints, lack of resources, and lack of integration of character values in the curriculum are still serious obstacles. In addition, the attitude of teachers who are not fully inclusive and the lack of specific training are also challenges.

The success of inclusive character education is greatly influenced by the active role of the school community as the main supporting factor. Synergy between teachers, principals, students, and parents strengthens a learning environment conducive to character building. Community support also accelerates the consistent internalization of character values in school and home life. Research (Yulina et al., 2023) noted that the involvement of all school elements, including parents in discussion forums and collaborative activities, is the main reinforcement in the implementation of character education policies at MTsN 3 Palas. Thus, actively involved communities are not only complementary, but the main determinants of the success of character education in an inclusive classroom.

Structural support in the form of school policies and culture also facilitates the process of implementing inclusive character education. Policies that contain a vision of character and are implemented in the form of real programs provide a clear direction for teachers in managing the diversity of learning needs. A school culture full of habituation and example strengthens informal but effective character building. Research (Wahyun et al., 2021) emphasizing that the culture of the madrasah that supports such as "Nine Noble Habits", 5S culture, as well as morning tadarus, has been proven to strengthen character cultivation in madrasah students, including students with special needs. With a supportive institutional structure, teachers can manage inclusive classrooms in a more systematic and sustainable manner in the context of character education.

One of the main obstacles to the implementation of inclusive character education is the limitation of human resources and supporting facilities. Teachers in inclusion classrooms often do not have specific training in dealing with the learning needs of students with different backgrounds. The absence of special assistant teachers (GPK) and adaptive facilities causes the character education process to not run optimally for ABK students. Research (Sam Amir et al., 2023) found that in inclusive elementary schools in Garut Regency, the lack of GPK, lack of technical guidance for the preparation of PPI (Individual Learning Programs), and limited facilities are the main obstacles in character services for students with disabilities. Thus, despite the pedagogical commitment, without adequate professional and logistical support, teachers' efforts to instill character in inclusive classrooms are hampered.

Low parental involvement and inconsistency in character values between home and school are also obstacles in inclusive character education. When the values instilled in school are not strengthened by families and students, especially those with special needs, it is difficult to maintain positive behavior outside the classroom. Lack of communication and parental awareness of the importance of collaboration in character education decreases the effectiveness of teachers' strategies. Research (Azizah & Lestari, 2021) reported that in social studies learning in the

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inclusion class of SMPN 39 Semarang, teachers faced difficulties due to the lack of parental support, so that the character formation built at school did not receive reinforcement at home. Therefore, the success of inclusive character education demands a collaborative approach that reaches not only teachers and schools, but also families as the main partners.

#### **DISCUSSIONS**

The discussion in this article critically examines how teachers build character education in inclusive classrooms, the strategies used, and the factors that support and hinder its implementation. Based on a study of (Filippou dkk., 2025; Singh & Pallai, 2023) Scientific articles, found that teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms are very complex and require an adaptive and humanist pedagogical approach. First, teachers' experiences show that the formation of inclusive student character cannot be separated from understanding students' cognitive, emotional, and social backgrounds. Teachers need to develop sensitivity to individual differences and integrate character values into all aspects of learning. This process demands exemplarity, consistency, and the use of reflective and participatory methods that allow students to internalize values naturally (Azizah & Lestari, 2021; Majid et al., 2023; Shutaleva et al., 2023). Second, the strategies used by teachers vary, ranging from contextual learning, based on local culture, habituation through school culture, to collaborative projects that develop empathy and social responsibility. This strategy provides space for students, including those with special needs, to demonstrate their capacity equally. Teachers are not only facilitators, but also moral agents who create an inclusive and transformative learning climate (Islamudin et al., 2023; Kasim et al., 2021; Nispiani et al., 2023). Third, the main supporting factors come from the commitment of the school community, supportive policies, and the culture of the madrasah or school that emphasizes character values. On the other hand, obstacles arise in the form of limited companion teachers, infrastructure, lack of inclusion-based character training, and low parental involvement in supporting the consistency of values at home (Azizah & Lestari, 2021; Sam Amir et al., 2023; Wahyun et al., 2021; Yulina et al., 2023).

These findings confirm that inclusive character education cannot be built from formal curriculum and policies alone, but must be supported by reflective pedagogical practices, structured internal policies, and active involvement of the entire education ecosystem. Teachers need to be facilitated on an ongoing basis through training, structural support, and collaboration spaces to ensure that the character instilled truly permeates and shapes the student's personality as a whole (Atanasova & Papen, 2025; Kudarinova et al., 2023; Surani et al., 2024).

## **CONCLUSION**

Inclusive character education is a strategic effort in responding to the challenges of 21st century education that demand recognition of the diversity of students' learning needs. Based on a critical review of scientific articles, it was found that the success of character education in inclusive classrooms is highly dependent on teachers' experiences and reflective capacity, adaptive learning strategies, and systemic support from the school environment and community. Teachers' experiences show that building character in an inclusive classroom demands sensitivity to students' cognitive, social, and emotional backgrounds. Effective strategies involve contextual learning, strengthening school culture, as well as approaches based on local wisdom and spirituality values. Teachers not only act as teachers, but also as facilitators of values and moral role models for all students. Supporting factors for the implementation of inclusive character education include internal school policies, the commitment of principals and teachers, and parental involvement. On the contrary, the obstacles faced include limited teacher assistants, infrastructure, and lack of special training for teachers in dealing with students with diverse learning needs. Therefore, inclusive character education requires cross-sectoral collaboration involving teachers, principals, parents, and policymakers. The implementation of character education is not sufficiently normative, but must be realized in sustainable, reflective, and contextual pedagogical practices. This study recommends strengthening teachers' professional capacity, integrating values in adaptive curriculum, and developing an inclusive and transformative school culture.

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