

Inclusive Education as a Catalyst for Social Belonging and Engagement: University Teachers' Insights on Students with Disabilities

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Abstract:

This study examined university teachers' perceptions, preparedness, and challenges related to inclusive education at Oum El Bouaghi University, focusing on their responses to bullying and marginalization of students with disabilities. Using a mixed-methods exploratory design, it combined an online questionnaire completed by 20 participants with the researchers' autoethnographic reflections on teaching a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Findings indicated that inclusion was viewed in terms of feasibility, with teachers relying on small, practical strategies. However, peer attitudes, limited training, and cultural stigmas remained obstacles, leaving inclusive education in Algerian universities at a critical stage.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder; bullying; inclusive education; marginalization; students with disabilities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, emphasizing the right of all learners, regardless of ability, background, or circumstances, to access equitable learning opportunities in mainstream classrooms. Global frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and recent UNESCO initiatives have reinforced the view that inclusion is not merely a pedagogical strategy but a moral and social imperative (UNESCO, 2023). In

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this view, education is seen not just as a way to share knowledge, but also as a space where care, dignity and social belonging are nurtured.

However, bullying, discrimination and marginalization remain critical issues for learners with disabilities, particularly in higher education, where institutional support is often less structured than in primary and secondary settings. Subtle forms of exclusion (e.g., avoidance in group work or inequities in assessment) may undermine students' sense of belonging as profoundly as overt acts of bullying (Ručman & Šulc, 2025). In this context, inclusive education must be understood not only as access but as care and support, ensuring that students with disabilities are not merely present in classrooms but fully engaged as valued members of the academic community.

Despite the international momentum, the lived realities of inclusion vary considerably across regions, particularly in under-resourced educational systems. Research in Algeria indicates that while educators often express willingness to embrace inclusion, their efforts are constrained by structural barriers, inadequate resources, and the persistence of discriminatory attitudes at both institutional and peer levels (Layachi et al., 2024; Dukmak et al., 2024).

The present study investigates teachers' attitudes and experiences of inclusive education at Oum El Bouaghi University in Algeria, complemented by the researchers' reflective insights grounded in autoethnographic practice. Specifically, it explores how educators perceive and respond to issues of bullying, discrimination and marginalization affecting learners with disabilities. This study set out to explore how university teachers view inclusive education, how prepared they feel to put it into practice, and the kinds of challenges they face in doing so.

Accordingly, this research addresses the following questions:

- 1) What are the attitudes of teachers at Oum El Bouaghi University toward inclusive education?
- 2) How do these teachers perceive and respond to bullying, discrimination and marginalization of students with disabilities?
- 3) What challenges do they encounter when attempting to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms?

4) What insights can be drawn from teachers' reflective experiences to improve inclusive practices for students with ASD?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions of Inclusive Education

The terms 'normalization', 'integration', 'mainstreaming', 'least restrictive environment' and 'inclusion' have often been used interchangeably to describe Inclusive Education. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of inclusion, and the descriptions remain somewhat general or inconsistent. Brojčin (2009) described inclusion as the full participation of all children in the educational system regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or disability. Similarly, Loreman (1999) argued that inclusive education involves students from diverse backgrounds and abilities learning alongside their peers in regular schools, which must adapt their practices to meet the needs of all learners. Rafferty et al. (2001) added that inclusion is "the process of educating children with disabilities in the regular education classrooms of their neighbourhood schools ... and providing them with the necessary services and support" (p. 266). From these definitions, inclusion can be understood as a philosophy of social justice that advocates equal access to education for all, regardless of differences. Instead of segregating learners with disabilities, inclusive education emphasizes adapting regular classes to accommodate every student (Brojčin, 2009; Loreman, 1999; Rafferty et al., 2001).

2.2 Inclusive Education vs. Integration

According to Chhabra et al. (2010), integration refers to the "placement of a student with disabilities into an ordinary school environment and regular curriculum, usually without the curriculum being modified to any great extent" (p. 219). By contrast, inclusion "implies such a restructuring of mainstream schooling that every school can accommodate every child irrespective of disability (accommodation rather than assimilation) and ensures that all learners belong to a community" (Avramidis et al., 2000, p. 192). In other words, inclusive education not only brings students with and without disabilities together but also reshapes schools to respond to diverse needs by making curricula more flexible and accessible (Chhabra et al., 2010; Avramidis et al., 2000).

2.3 Social Dimension of Inclusive Education

A core idea of inclusion is that students with and without disabilities gain social benefits from learning together. Koster et al. (2009) identified four dimensions of this social experience: positive interaction between students with and without disabilities, acceptance by peers, friendships, and the perception by students with disabilities that they are accepted by classmates. Research has shown that students with disabilities in inclusive schools have more opportunities for interaction and friendships with peers compared to those in segregated schools (Flem & Keller, 2000). They also report stronger feelings of belonging and higher aspirations for learning (Mahbub, 2008). Similarly, typically developing students benefit socially and emotionally, gaining greater sensitivity and awareness of differences (Boer et al., 2012). However, studies also highlight that bullying, rejection and marginalization are significant risks in inclusive settings. These negative peer experiences can lead to academic difficulties, dropping out, or behavioral problems (Jackson & Bracken, 1998). In extreme cases, bullying can contribute to depression and other mental health issues (Ručman & Šulc, 2025; Alenezi, 2024; UNGEI, 2023). This demonstrates that inclusion must be carefully implemented to ensure it acts as a protective pathway rather than exposing learners to further discrimination.

2.4 Bullying, Discrimination and Marginalization of Learners with Disabilities

While inclusive education promotes equal access and belonging, learners with disabilities remain particularly vulnerable to bullying, discrimination and marginalization in schools. Recent research confirms that students with disabilities often experience higher rates of victimization compared to their peers, which undermines the intended protective role of inclusion (Ručman & Šulc, 2025). Bullying may take verbal, physical or relational forms, and its persistence can negatively impact students' self-esteem, academic engagement, and psychological well-being. These exclusionary practices not only hinder learning but also reinforce stereotypes and stigmatization, thereby reproducing inequality within inclusive settings. Findings from Middle Eastern and North African contexts also illustrate the challenges of inclusion when institutional and cultural barriers remain

unaddressed. Dukmak et al. (2024) revealed that typically developing students sometimes display ambivalent or exclusionary attitudes toward their peers with disabilities, making social participation conditional rather than universal. Similarly, Sepadi (2025) highlighted that teachers in rural schools often struggle to address bullying and exclusion due to limited training and insufficient resources, which contributes to marginalization. Layachi et al. (2024) further emphasized that inclusive interventions need to move beyond physical placement and actively foster social integration to counter stigma and discriminatory attitudes.

2.4.1 Bullying and Discrimination against Autistic Students

Among all disability groups, children with ASD are particularly exposed to bullying and peer rejection in inclusive classrooms. Their social communication differences and behavioral patterns often make them targets of exclusion and ridicule (Alenezi, 2024). Research indicates that autistic students are more likely than their peers with other disabilities to be marginalized, both socially and academically, which increases their risk of emotional distress and disengagement from schooling. Although inclusive frameworks intend to create supportive environments, the presence of unprepared teachers and insufficient peer awareness often results in autistic learners being isolated rather than integrated (Alenezi, 2024). Ručman and Šulc (2025) noted that bullying against students with disabilities, including ASD, remains a global challenge even in schools formally committed to inclusion. This highlights the need for systemic responses, such as teacher professional development, peer-sensitivity programs, and structured interventions designed to reduce stigma and foster empathy. Taken together, these studies underline that inclusive education, if not effectively implemented, can inadvertently expose learners with disabilities-especially autistic students-to bullying and discrimination, thereby reproducing marginalization rather than alleviating it (Sepadi, 2025; Layachi et al., 2024; Dukmak et al., 2024; Ručman & Šulc, 2025; Alenezi, 2024).

2.5 Teachers' Attitudes toward Inclusive Education

Teachers' support for inclusive education is crucial to its success, since their attitudes strongly influence how they approach learners with disabilities (Unianu, 2012). Yet, negative or hesitant attitudes remain one of the main

barriers to inclusion (Todorovic et al., 2011; Nonis, 2006). Several factors shape these attitudes, including prejudice, teaching experience, class size and availability of resources (Todorovic et al., 2011). Teachers often express concern about lacking institutional support, which can result in unintentional exclusion or neglect (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006; Sepadi, 2025). Also, teacher training and professional development are decisive. Programs that equip teachers with strategies and knowledge to manage diversity can significantly improve attitudes toward inclusion (Layachi et al., 2024). Ultimately, teachers' preparedness is a critical predictor of whether inclusion reduces or reinforces discrimination (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods exploratory design that combined survey research and autoethnographic insights. The primary aim was to investigate university teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, their preparedness to implement it, and the challenges they encounter. It also explored their awareness of and responses to bullying, discrimination and marginalization of students with disabilities.

The online questionnaire included two sections: the first comprised 12 items gathering demographic information and participants' views on challenges and support related to inclusive education, while the second consisted of a 32-item Attitudinal Scale adapted from Wilczenski's (1995) *Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES)* and Loreman et al.'s (2007) the *Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale (SACIE-S)*.

The survey involved 20 educators from seven departments at Oum El Bouaghi University. Ten participants reported having between one and five years of experience working with students with disabilities, while only two participants had more than ten years of such experience; the remaining participants had none. Six participants were currently teaching students with disabilities.

To complement the quantitative findings, qualitative insights were derived from the researchers' reflective journals and field notes, which drew upon their teaching experiences with a female university student aged around 20–21 and diagnosed with mild ASD. These reflections enriched the study

with contextualized understandings of inclusive practice and teacher learning in real educational settings.

4. Results

4.1 The Questionnaire Results

Q. What types of impairments have you observed among current or former students with special needs in your class?

Table N^o(01): Reported Types and Frequencies of Student Impairments

Visual impairment	11
Hearing impairment	2
Intellectual disability	0
Physical disability	2
Language disability	2
Multi-disabilities	0
Other: Chronic disease	1

The data show that visual impairment is by far the most frequently reported type of disability, representing more than half of all identified cases (11 out of 18 responses, 61.11%). This suggests that students with visual impairments are the most visible group in inclusive settings at Oum El Bouaghi University. Other impairments were reported less frequently; hearing impairments, physical disabilities, and language disabilities were each mentioned by only two participants (11.11% each). No cases of intellectual disabilities or multiple disabilities were reported. One participant mentioned a student with a chronic disease, which highlights that not all inclusion cases strictly fall under traditional categories of disability. This response shows that teachers may also encounter students with long-term health conditions requiring additional academic and social support.

Q. Have you received any training or taken part in any courses in special education?

When asked whether they had received any training or participated in courses related to special education, all 20 participants answered “No”. This indicates a complete lack of formal training in special education among the surveyed university educators, revealing a clear gap in professional preparation for inclusive teaching. Such a lack of training may affect teachers’ confidence and attitudes toward inclusion.

Q. What are the biggest challenges you face or have faced regarding inclusive education?

The majority of participants identified several recurring challenges in implementing inclusive education at the university level:

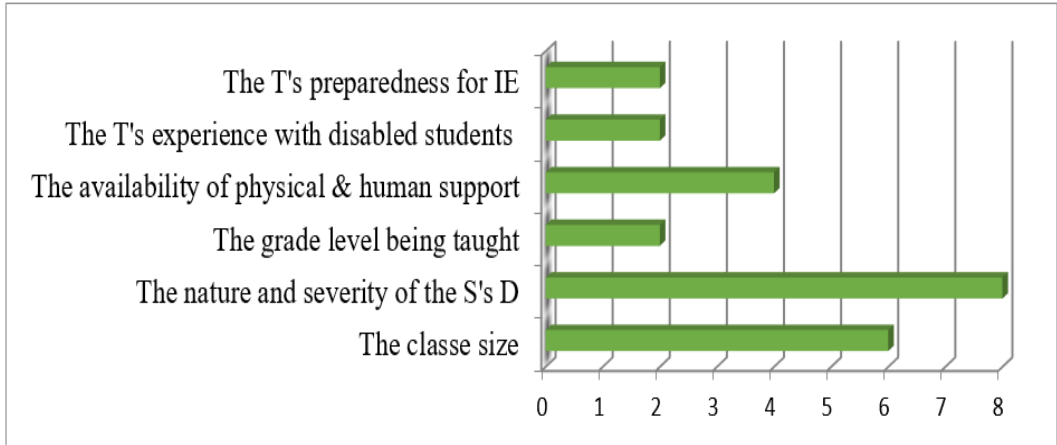
- Lack of resources and materials: Many teachers highlighted inadequate or absent teaching aids to support students with disabilities.
- Increased workload: Participants noted that inclusive teaching requires additional time, effort, and preparation. As one participant wrote: *“The challenge for me is that working with students with disabilities needs extra time and effort.”*
- Balancing attention: Teachers expressed concern that the extra attention required by students with disabilities may come at the expense of other students. One participant, for example, described the challenge of supporting a blind student: *“I once had a blind student who required a great deal of attention, sometimes to the disadvantage of the other students. Since his vision was impaired, he relied heavily on his hearing, and his way of understanding, following, and remembering information was to ask the teacher to repeat or re-explain. Unlike him, the other students could review their lectures again at home thanks to their eyesight. For this reason, both I and the other students supported him by being patient and tolerant—qualities that one learns to develop in response to such circumstances.”*
- Need for teacher training: Several participants emphasized that effective inclusion requires re-training of regular teachers, many of whom lack prior experience in this area. As one noted: *“I have no experience with inclusive education.”*
- Assessment difficulties: Teachers reported challenges in designing and administering fair assessments for students with disabilities, particularly for those with visual impairments during written examinations.

These challenges reflect both structural and pedagogical barriers that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Q. What factors do you think impact your attitude towards inclusive education?

The responses indicate several factors shaping teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education.

Fig N⁰(01): Factors Influencing Participants' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education



The most influential factor, mentioned by 8 participants, is *the nature and severity of the student's disability (S's D)*. This suggests that teachers feel their perception and approach depend largely on the extent of the student's needs and challenges. The *class size* was the second most common factor, cited by 6 respondents. Large classes may make it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention, thus negatively affecting their attitudes towards inclusion. The *availability of physical and human support* was also highlighted by 4 participants, emphasizing the role of resources and assistance in shaping positive or negative perceptions. Meanwhile, *the grade level being taught*, *teachers' experience with disabled students*, and *teachers' preparedness for Inclusive Education* were each mentioned by 2 respondents. Although less frequently cited, these factors still play a role in influencing teachers' confidence and attitudes. Overall, the findings show that teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are mostly shaped by external conditions (class size, resources, severity of disability), but also by internal factors (experience and preparedness).

Q. What supports would you like to see / receive in order to improve inclusive education within the mainstream university classroom?

Participants highlighted several types of support they considered essential for improving inclusive education in the university classroom. They emphasized the need for *educational resources tailored to each type of disability*, as well as the possibility of *organizing private sessions or tutoring with handicapped students to compensate for parts of lectures that were not assimilated at the students' request*. In addition, they stressed the importance of *specialized teacher training*, with one participant noting that "*inclusive education requires the teacher to be psychologically and intellectually*

prepared to handle teaching students with various types of disabilities”. These responses collectively underline the demand for both structural and professional measures (adequate resources, individualized support, and teacher preparation) that can enable the effective and equitable implementation of inclusive education in mainstream university classrooms.

Q: Have you ever observed or been informed about a student with a disability experiencing bullying in your class or institution? If yes, how was it handled?

Responses revealed diverse levels of awareness and experience among teachers. Many participants reported having directly witnessed bullying, particularly in the form of mockery during presentations. These teachers described taking immediate corrective action, often emphasizing respect. A few participants mentioned observing indirect bullying, especially through avoidance of group work. One teacher reported that she did not witness explicit bullying but acknowledged the likelihood of subtle forms of exclusion, while only 2 participants reported no experience at all. These findings suggest that while overt bullying is less frequently observed, indirect and subtle forms of social aggression are more prevalent in higher education contexts. Teachers demonstrate varying levels of intervention, with some actively addressing the problem while others only acknowledge its existence.

Q: In your experience, do students with disabilities face unfair treatment? Please provide examples.

When asked about unfair treatment, 7 teachers reported group work discrimination, noting peers’ assumptions that students with disabilities contribute less. Five teachers identified assessment-related disadvantages, especially due to traditional exam formats that lack accommodations. Three participants noted mixed experiences, depending on the classroom culture. Only one participant claimed they had not observed discrimination in their own classes. The responses highlight how discrimination often occurs in structural and procedural forms, not just interpersonal interactions. In particular, assessment practices were identified as inherently disadvantaging learners with disabilities, underscoring the institutional dimension of exclusion. These results indicate that discrimination is not always intentional but may stem from systemic barriers and lack of flexible policies.

Q: Do you think students with disabilities are sometimes socially or academically excluded by peers or by institutional practices? What factors contribute to this?

Teachers provided a nuanced picture of marginalization. Six participants noted clear social exclusion, where students with disabilities were isolated during breaks. Five reported peer avoidance in group projects,

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and also emphasized institutional barriers, including large class sizes, lack of training, and insufficient support staff. Two teachers, however, perceived that marginalization was not always present, highlighting cases of social acceptance. These accounts point to two levels of marginalization. On the one hand, there is peer-level marginalization, reflected in social exclusion and avoidance during group work. On the other hand, there is institutional marginalization, manifested through structural barriers such as large class sizes, lack of teacher training, and the absence of support staff. While some students with disabilities appear able to integrate successfully and even gain peer acceptance, systemic challenges continue to restrict equal opportunities and hinder full participation.

Q. In your view, how can inclusive teaching practices help reduce bullying, discrimination, and marginalization in the university classroom?

Responses to this question varied significantly, reflecting a spectrum of teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education. A majority of participants (60%) expressed supportive and optimistic views, emphasizing that clear communication, modeling respect, and scaffolding success are effective ways to counter bullying and exclusion. Others (30%) adopted more neutral or cautious positions, acknowledging the potential of inclusive practices but stressing that peer attitudes and institutional support play a decisive role in determining their success. A smaller group (10%) voiced resistant views, expressing doubts about the effectiveness of inclusion in practice and pointing to large class sizes and uncooperative peers as major limiting factors. Hence, the distribution of responses shows a predominantly positive orientation toward inclusive practices, though tempered by practical concerns. Optimistic teachers view inclusion as a direct tool to reduce discrimination, while cautious and resistant voices underscore the structural and cultural limitations within higher education. This divergence aligns with the quantitative findings from the scale, where some participants displayed negative or ambivalent attitudes toward inclusion.

The Attitudinal Scale Results

The participants' scores on the scale were computed, ranked from highest to lowest, and subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Table N⁰(02) : The Participants' Scores on the Attitudinal Scale

Participant	P14	P15	P16	P11	P19	P18	P12	P17	P20	P9
Score	47	51	52	53	56	57	58	65	66	67
Participant	P13	P7	P1	P6	P3	P8	P4	P5	P10	P2
Score	70	81	84	88	89	89	90	91	91	93

Table N⁰(03) : Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Scores on the Inclusive Education Attitude Scale

Statistic	Value
N	20
Minimum	47
Maximum	93
Mean	71.9
Standard Deviation	16.49
Median	68.50

The descriptive statistics presented in table 3 provide an overview of the participants' scores on the inclusive education attitude scale. The scores ranged from a minimum of 47 to a maximum of 93, with a mean of 71.9, suggesting that, on average, participants displayed moderately positive attitudes towards inclusive education. The standard deviation of 16.49 indicates a relatively wide spread of responses, reflecting differences in teachers' perspectives. The median score of 68.5 is slightly lower than the mean, which means that while most participants scored in the 60s and 70s, a few very high scores (above 90) raised the overall average. Overall, these results highlight variability among educators: while some hold strong positive attitudes toward inclusion, others appear less favorable, which may reflect differences in training, experience, or exposure to students with disabilities.

4.2 The Autoethnographic Insights Results

Background

The subject is a female autistic student at the age of approximately 20-21 years. The first encounter with her, occurred during the first semester examinations, where she displayed distinctive behavior: limited eye contact, unusual word choice, and rapid speech. At that time, her condition was unknown to the researchers, but it was clear she experienced differences in communication and interaction. Later, she enrolled in two modules taught by the researchers (one was a lecture and the second was TD) during her third year of a bachelor's degree in English.

Challenges Faced

The subject's academic and social experiences in the classroom were marked by several difficulties. She often spoke too quickly, making it hard for others to follow her ideas, and her handwriting was nearly incomprehensible, with words linked together. She sometimes

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misunderstood instructions and produced work that was off-topic, while at other times she delivered creative, original answers.

Her social interactions were equally challenging. She seemed introverted and refused physical closeness or sharing of her belongings, which made collaboration in group work particularly difficult. On one occasion, when she was scheduled to present second, she insisted on going first, became nervous, and presented material that was unrelated to the assigned topic. While the researchers managed the situation empathetically, classmates noticed her deviation. Peers occasionally laughed at her unusual behaviors during presentations, though they would stop quickly when reminded through subtle cues.

A more serious challenge appeared during group assignments; most students refused to work with her, citing her lack of collaboration. In one case, when group members accused her of not completing her share of the project, she defended herself calmly. Knowing her honesty, the researchers recognized that she was unfairly blamed by peers seeking to avoid penalties. Such incidents reflect the marginalization and subtle discrimination that students with disabilities often face in higher education.

Intervention and Support

In the early stages of teaching this student, the researchers admit to making some mistakes in communication and evaluation due to a lack of professional training in addressing the needs of this kind of students. However, over two years of experience, several supportive strategies were developed:

- Direct communication: Sending emails that could also be read by her parents, ensuring she received clear instructions and reminders.
- Individual clarification: Offering private moments after class to re-explain instructions or provide guidance tailored to her needs.
- Awareness-raising: Addressing classmates informally about the importance of empathy and tolerance, discouraging laughter or exclusionary attitudes.
- Flexibility: Allowing adjustments when necessary, such as modifying presentation order, while still maintaining fairness in evaluation.

These actions were modest but realistic within the constraints of crowded university classrooms and multiple teaching responsibilities.

Outcomes

Over time, gradual improvements became evident. The subject began greeting the researchers in hallways, indicating greater comfort and reduced aggressiveness. Her communication with the teacher increased, and she

showed more willingness to engage in learning tasks. Peers, who initially resisted collaborating with her, became more accepting during group activities, partly due to the researchers' interventions and the classroom culture of tolerance that was cultivated. Nevertheless, unresolved challenges persisted. The university environment, with large class sizes and numerous teachers, made it impossible to provide consistent individualized support. Systemic barriers, such as the absence of institutional inclusion policies and specialized support staff, limited the sustainability of these efforts.

Reflections

This experience taught the researchers that small, intentional actions, such as clear communication, empathy, and teacher modeling of respectful behavior, can make significant differences in the inclusion of students with disabilities. It also underscored the limitations of individual efforts in the absence of institutional structures for inclusive education.

In the Algerian context, where awareness of ASD and inclusive pedagogy remains limited, this case illustrates the urgent need for teacher training, institutional policies, and peer sensitization programs to ensure that students with disabilities are not marginalized. Inclusive education emerges as a vital practice to address bullying, discrimination, and exclusion, transforming classrooms into spaces of acceptance, respect, and equity.

4.3 Analysis of the Autoethnographic Case Study

The case illustrates the complex realities of implementing inclusive education for learners with ASD in Algerian university. Inclusion in this context was largely driven by individual teacher initiative rather than institutional policy. The university teacher adopted strategies such as direct communication, individualized clarification and peer sensitization to foster understanding and tolerance. This intervention relied heavily on empathy, flexibility and sustained teacher effort, focusing particularly on communication and academic adjustment.

The learner encountered forms of bullying through mockery and avoidance, discrimination through unfair treatment, and marginalization expressed in exclusion from group work or being met with pity rather than genuine respect. Teacher intervention, through modeling respect and awareness-raising, helped mitigate bullying, yet prevention remained largely dependent on the teacher's presence and influence. The case revealed how learners with disabilities are vulnerable to multiple layers of exclusion in higher education settings. At the same time, it demonstrated the transformative role of inclusive practices. Clear communication, consistent teacher support, confidence-building strategies, and classroom awareness-

raising helped counteract bullying, reduce discrimination, and challenge marginalization, thereby fostering more respectful and supportive learning environments.

Ultimately, the case underscores the decisive role of the teacher in shaping inclusive experiences. From the perspective of a teacher-researcher, inclusion goes well beyond classroom strategies—it is fundamentally about safeguarding the dignity of learners with disabilities and ensuring they are treated equitably. Inclusion was achieved not through systemic readiness but through compassionate pedagogy, adaptive strategies, and relational trust. Yet, this experience also reveals the fragility of such inclusion when it depends solely on personal commitment. While individual teacher efforts can make a real difference, they remain limited without the backing of the wider institution. Sustainable inclusion therefore requires strong institutional support and clear policies. It also depends on sufficient resources, ongoing teacher training, and peer education. These elements are essential to move beyond temporary accommodation toward genuine participation and to ensure that the fight against bullying, discrimination, and marginalization is truly effective.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how teachers at Oum El Bouaghi University perceive and respond to inclusive education. This study highlights that inclusive education in this university is not primarily a matter of willingness but of systemic readiness. Teachers' accounts reveal that while many are ideologically supportive of inclusion, their capacity to enact it is constrained by institutional structures, cultural attitudes and the absence of professional preparation. Such findings align with the broader African and regional evidence showing that despite widespread recognition of the importance of inclusion, systemic barriers continue to undermine its practice (ACERWC, 2024; UNICEF, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). The variability in attitudes underscores that inclusive education is not experienced as a universal good, but as a contested practice shaped by competing pressures of workload, class size, peer dynamics, and available resources. These dynamics echo the findings of Sepadi (2025), who noted that teachers in under-resourced contexts approach inclusion in terms of what is realistically possible, rather than as an ideal principle.

Another important finding is that the unspoken attitudes and behaviors of peers often have a stronger influence on the experiences of students with disabilities than the formal teaching strategies used in the classroom.

Teachers in this study observed that subtle forms of avoidance, pity or exclusion may be more damaging than overt bullying, because they normalize marginalization in everyday interactions. This resonates with recent international evidence demonstrating that students with disabilities face disproportionate risks of social exclusion and relational aggression in educational environments (Ručman & Šulc, 2025; UNGEI, 2023). In the Algerian context, Layachi et al. (2024) found that structured interventions, such as drama-based activities, can counteract peer marginalization, illustrating that attitudes are not fixed but can be reshaped when empathy and collaboration are intentionally cultivated. These findings underline that inclusive education cannot be reduced to classroom techniques alone; it requires cultivating a culture of empathy and respect among students, supported by clear institutional frameworks.

The results further show that teachers interpret inclusion through the lens of feasibility. Optimistic perspectives were often tied to small, concrete practices such as scaffolding tasks, modeling respect, or clarifying instructions, practices that could realistically be implemented even in under-resourced contexts. By contrast, skeptical perspectives stemmed from a perception that inclusion requires resources and systemic adjustments that universities currently do not provide. This suggests that attitudes toward inclusion are not static traits but pragmatic responses to the conditions in which teachers work, an interpretation echoed by Sepadi (2025) and supported by Dukmak et al. (2024), who observed similar uncertainty among educators in the United Arab Emirates.

The autoethnographic case included in this study illustrates these tensions vividly. The case reveals that inclusion is not achieved by eliminating difference but by negotiating it. In the experience with the university student with ASD, small adjustments in communication and awareness-raising reduced her marginalization. This finding aligns with Alenezi (2024), who demonstrated that inclusion can reduce bullying among children with ASD when teachers and peers are actively engaged in fostering understanding. Inclusion is not something permanent; it can grow when the right support is in place, but it can quickly break down if that support is missing.

Taken together, these insights suggest that inclusive education is at a crossroads. Teachers' goodwill and personal commitment exist, but they are undermined by a lack of training, slow institutional response, and persistent cultural stigmas around disability. This conclusion is consistent with global and regional research showing that successful inclusion requires systemic

coherence, where teacher education, institutional policy and peer engagement must align if inclusive practices are to be sustainable (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023; ACERWC, 2024). Without this alignment, inclusion risks remaining a discourse of aspiration rather than a practice of transformation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted inclusive education as both a theoretical framework of social justice and a practical approach to fostering equity and belonging for learners with disabilities. Teachers' attitudes, institutional support and cultural perceptions play decisive roles in shaping the experiences of students with disabilities, particularly those most vulnerable, such as autistic learners. Findings from Oum El Bouaghi University confirm that inclusion is not merely about physical placement but about creating spaces of care, dignity and social participation. Yet, gaps remain between policy and practice, with challenges including insufficient training, limited resources and persistent negative attitudes. In practical terms, universities should prioritize teacher preparation through continuous professional development, design peer-awareness programs to challenge stereotypes, and establish institutional mechanisms for preventing and addressing bullying and discrimination. At a broader level, inclusive education must be seen as an ongoing process that requires commitment, flexibility, and collaboration among teachers, administrators, students and policymakers. By embracing inclusion as care and support, higher education can move from token integration toward genuine empowerment, ensuring that learners with disabilities are not victims of marginalization but full participants in academic and social life.

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