Transforming Inclusive Classrooms Through Student-Centred Teaching Practices: A Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Learning Outcomes in Special Education

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ABSTRACT:

The global commitment to inclusive education enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) requires teachers, school leaders, and policymakers to build learning environments that accommodate diversity of students(Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey 2011) across cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and social dimensions. At present, the field lacks a practical framework capable of integrating evidence-based strategies, and this conceptual paper will fill this gap.This study draws on four classic educational theories—constructivist learning theory, social learning theory, humanistic education theory, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)—to build an integrated framework for effective teaching methods in special education. It consolidates the framework's core dimensions into five pillars, and all nine evidence-based teaching dimensions embedded in the framework are explicitly defined, serving as the core analytical framework for the full paper. This paper proposes that inclusive classrooms cannot be built relying on a single strategy, and require coordinated efforts from five core dimensions, including relational dynamics and pedagogical approaches. A supporting framework can help educators put the concept of inclusive education into practice and clarify clear practical directions for teachers, school administrators, and policymakers.

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Keywords: inclusive education, special educational needs, differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, social-emotional learning

1. Introduction

This paper sorts out the transformation trajectory of the field of education for students with special needs over the past three decades: this field originated from the movement to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream schools, and has evolved into today's global inclusive education agenda. Inclusive education means that all learners, regardless of their ability, background, or circumstances, can access high-quality learning in shared classrooms and participate deeply in that learning. The United Nations articulated this vision in 2015's SDG4. UNESCO's 1994 Salamanca Declaration and its 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report focused on the theme of inclusion translated this vision into an operable policy framework, anchoring that inclusive education is a fundamental human right rather than a charitable placement.

Although inclusive education has secured broad policy consensus, it's on-the-ground implementation has long remained uneven. The four groups of students with special education needs—those with learning disabilities, developmental differences, sensory impairments, and behavioural challenges encounter misalignment between traditional teaching and their needs across the cognitive, affective, and learning preference dimensions. Research conducted by Friend, Bursuck, and other scholars has corroborated this problem, whose core cause is precisely the inclusion gap between policy and practice.

According to Hattie's 2009 study, effective teaching is the single school-based factor that exerts the greatest impact on students' academic achievement. When this conclusion is applied to the context of inclusive education, new complexities emerge. After sorting out the relevant core competency dimensions by drawing on findings from McLeskey et al.'s 2017 study and Florian's 2019 study, an integrated practice framework must be established at the implementation stage, instead of a collection of scattered, isolated strategies.

This study builds on the field's research gaps outlined in the preceding part of this work, integrates evidence-based teaching practices from multiple theoretical traditions, and draws on foundational contemporary research to put forward a five-pillar conceptual framework that supports effective special education. This framework covers 9 dimensions of inclusive teaching; its interconnected pillars form a comprehensive plan suited to all students, and it can guide teachers' practice, support the development of educational institutions, and facilitate the design of systemic policies.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 clarifies the research objectives, Section 3 outlines the theoretical foundations, and Sections 4 through 7 sequentially analyse the core dimensions, propose the research framework, discuss research implications, and summarise the study while laying out future research directions.

2. Objectives of the study

This study is guided by four interrelated objectives:

- To identify and synthesise evidence-based teaching practices most relevant to inclusive and special education classrooms.
- To examine how student-centred learning approaches promote genuine inclusion and improve outcomes for students with special educational needs.
- To develop a conceptual framework that integrates relational, pedagogical, environmental,

technological, and community dimensions of effective inclusive teaching.

• To derive practical and actionable recommendations for teachers, school administrators, and education policymakers.

3. Theoretical Foundations

The research framework proposed in this paper draws on four complementary theoretical traditions, each with a unique perspective. Accompanying Figure 1 presents a comparison of these theories and their classroom applications.

Exhibit 1: Theoretical Foundations of the Inclusive Teaching Framework

Theoretical Framework	Core Premise	Application in Inclusive Classrooms
Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978)	Learners construct knowledge through active engagement with experiences rather than passive reception of information.	Problem-based tasks, hands-on experiments, and scaffolded inquiry activities allow students with diverse cognitive profiles to build understanding at their own pace.
Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977)	Behaviour and learning occur through observation, imitation, and modelling within social contexts.	Structured peer collaboration, cooperative learning groups, and teacher modelling of inclusive behaviours reinforce positive social and academic norms.
Humanistic Education Theory (Rogers, 1969)	Learner autonomy, emotional safety, self-esteem, and authentic relationships are prerequisites for meaningful learning.	Empathetic teacher-student relationships, personalised feedback, and student voice practices sustain motivation and self-confidence.
Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018)	Curricula and instruction designed for all learners from the outset eliminate barriers without requiring retrofitted accommodations.	Multiple means of engagement (why), representation (what), and action and expression (how) operationalise equitable access to content.

This study synthesizes and organizes four core educational theories that underpin the inclusive teaching framework. It first establishes three core logical modules: theoretical foundation, core premises, and classroom application, then elaborates on each theory in turn: Constructivism (Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978) holds that learners actively build knowledge, and its classroom implementation adopts problem-oriented tasks and scaffolded inquiry to accommodate diverse cognitive paces. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory argues that learning occurs within social contexts, and its implementation promotes structured peer collaboration. Rogers' (1969) humanism emphasizes the central role of emotional safety, and its implementation develops empathetic teacher-student relationships. CAST's (2018) Universal Design for Learning posits that curricula should be adapted to suit all learners

from their initial design, and its implementation secures equitable access through multiple pathways. All content organized in this study cites properly formatted, standardized source references.

Constructivist learning theory originated from the classic developmental psychology research of Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978). This study proposes that this theory can make up for the shortcomings of standardized teaching in special needs education, and support three core teaching tools: hands-on practical activities, collaborative inquiry, and scaffolded problem-solving.

The social learning theory proposed by Bandura in 1977 clearly states that observation, imitation, and peer interaction are core rather than peripheral elements of the educational process. In inclusive classrooms, building structured social learning experiences can promote both academic and social development, and teachers' modelling of inclusive attitudes and behavior can also shape classroom cultural norms.

The humanistic education theory proposed by Rogers in 1969 canters on emphasizing the importance of the emotional and relational conditions required for learning. These elements are far from being luxuries that can only be addressed after academic goals are achieved; instead, they are prerequisites for effective learning, and they underpin the core framework of this study.

Proposed by CAST in 2018, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is the most directly actionable theoretical framework in the field of inclusive education. It requires that curricula account for the diverse needs of all learners from the initial design stage, rather than adding targeted adaptations as an afterthought. Its three core principles; multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression, can be translated into the differentiated and flexible teaching that forms the second pillar of this framework.

4. Key Dimensions of Effective Special Education Teaching

This paper opens by first reviewing academic literature related to effective teaching in the contexts of inclusive education and special education. A consensus has been formed in the field that interconnected practices collectively constitute high-quality inclusive teaching. The paper will subsequently elaborate on nine core dimensions in detail, and Exhibit 2 accompanying this text provides a comprehensive overview of these dimensions.

Exhibit 2: Key Dimensions of Effective Special Education Teaching

Dimension	Focus Area	Representative Practices	Expected Outcomes
Teacher-Student Relationships	Trust and emotional security	Name-based recognition, personalised feedback, empathetic communication	Increased motivation, reduced anxiety, stronger sense of belonging
Positive Classroom Climate	Safety, respect, and acceptance	Positive reinforcement, avoidance of inter-student comparisons, and celebrating effort	Higher engagement, reduced disruptive behaviour, improved self-esteem
Experiential and Active Learning	Meaning through experience	Role plays, simulations, project-based learning, and field activities	Deeper conceptual understanding, improved retention and generalisation

Dimension	Focus Area	Representative Practices	Expected Outcomes
Collaborative Learning	Peer interaction and social skill	Cooperative tasks, peer tutoring, structured group projects	Enhanced communication, empathy, and sense of community
Technology-Enhanced Learning	Adaptive access to content	Assistive technologies, educational apps, interactive platforms	Equitable participation, self-paced learning, engagement
Social and Emotional Learning	Emotional literacy and regulation	SEL curricula, mindfulness practices, emotion-labelling activities	Improved self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and resilience
Family and Community Engagement	Home-school alignment	Regular parent communication, shared goal-setting, home learning extensions	Consistent reinforcement of learning, parental agency, holistic development

4.1 Building strong teacher-student Relationship

Relationships are a core topic in educational research. Hattie's 2009 authoritative study confirms that the quality of teacher-student relationships can predict the learning outcomes of all students, and this association is even more significant for students with special educational needs. These students already face higher academic risks, and teachers' whole-person care is precisely the core pathway to protect them.

4.2 Cultivating a Positive and Inclusive Classroom Climate

A positive classroom climate is the core environmental foundation that determines whether learning can thrive. Research published by Horner and Sugai in 2015 in the field of school-wide positive behaviour support confirms that a safe, respectful, and predictable classroom environment has a clear positive correlation with improvements in students' academic and behavioural performance. For students with special needs who have repeatedly experienced failure, stigmatisation, and marginalisation, a genuine sense of inclusion in the classroom is an indispensable core foundation that supports their development.

4.3 Experiential and Active Learning

This study defines experiential learning as a learning process in which learners independently construct their cognition through direct engagement with tasks and problems rooted in authentic real-world contexts; this model is particularly well-aligned with the learning characteristics of most students with special needs. Compared to the learning barriers that often stem from abstract, text-oriented traditional teaching, these concrete, operable activities create accessible entry points for students to participate in learning. The conceptual understandings formed through experience are more easily transferred across different scenarios, a conclusion that is supported by Piaget's relevant 1973 study.

4.4 Collaborative Learning Approaches

Collaborative learning refers to an approach in which students work together in structured pairs or small groups to achieve shared academic goals, and it can simultaneously drive progress in two core categories of outcomes: academic and

social. Drawing on classic research in the field of educational psychology (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978), the internal operational mechanisms of this model can be clearly explained from the perspective of social learning theory. The authors of this paper affirm the model's dual value of delivering both sets of benefits, and it also brings three specific gains for students with special needs: gaining access to diverse thinking strategies, receiving informal academic support, and engaging in meaningful social interaction.

4.5 Technology-Enhanced Learning

Technology-enhanced learning can remove learning barriers for students with special needs, and digital technologies have opened up entirely new learning models for this group that were previously unattainable. The first category of assistive technologies, which includes text-to-speech software, speech recognition tools, screen readers, augmentative and alternative communication devices(Neeraja, B., et al. (2025), and adaptive keyboards, can eliminate specific barriers that prevent students from accessing learning content and demonstrating their knowledge; the second category, consisting of educational applications and interactive multimedia resources, can support multi-sensory engagement and enable self-paced learning that adapts to the differing processing speeds of diverse learners. The effectiveness of this multimedia learning is supported by research from Mayer (2009).

This study moves beyond the common understanding that frames technology solely as an auxiliary tool for teaching, and proposes that educational technology can give rise to new forms of collaborative and creative learning. Three types of practically implemented applications have emerged to date: first, online interactive platforms that break the spatial limits of physical classrooms, supporting cross-setting interactions between teachers and students and among peers; second, flipped learning models, which allow students to complete knowledge learning at their own pace before class, freeing up in-class time for hands-on practice with guided support; third, gamified review tools that not only boost student engagement but also deliver real-time learning feedback. However, technology application must follow a core set of principles derived from CAST (2018): it must align with specific learning goals and be paired with sufficient teacher support to prevent students with inadequate access to technology from falling into digital exclusion.

4.6 Social and Emotional Learning

The study then shifts to social-emotional learning (SEL), dispelling the misconception that academic achievement and emotional well-being are mutually exclusive. Drawing on supporting evidence from Zins et al. (2004), students with strong SEL competencies demonstrate better developmental outcomes. For students with special education needs, who face high rates of anxiety and social isolation, systematic SEL is a core dimension of inclusive teaching practices.

4.7 Differentiated Instruction and Formative Assessment

The core topic of this paragraph is differentiated instruction and formative assessment. Differentiated instruction refers to intentionally designed instructional experiences crafted to match the diverse learning readiness levels, learning profiles, and interests of students in the same shared classroom, and it is a core foundation of effective inclusive education. This definition is supported by the 2017 study of authoritative scholar Tomlinson. The implementation of differentiated instruction must be advanced along four core dimensions: content, process, learning outcomes, and learning environment, and the entire process is centrally guided by continuously obtained diagnostic data on students' learning progress.

4.8 Family and Community Engagement

Global education research has reached a widespread consensus: school-family engagement has a clear positive impact on students' academic achievement. For students with special education needs, the importance of

school-family relationships far exceeds that for the general student population. If schools and families can reach a consensus on students' strengths, needs, and goals, they can develop coordinated, unified support strategies that reinforce learning outcomes across settings. Conversely, if parents are excluded from the education process and lack information about their child's educational situation, they face high risks of communication errors, misaligned strategies, and missed intervention opportunities. This conclusion is supported by the 2010 study conducted by scholars including Armstrong.

This study challenges the narrow perception that home-school family engagement is restricted solely to regular parent-teacher meetings. It clarifies that effective engagement encompasses four universal core practices, and for families of students with special needs — who carry three burdens of rights safeguarding, caregiving, and overall coordination — it establishes exclusive communication standards that are accessible, respectful, and truly bidirectional.

The nine teaching dimensions outlined in the preceding text are by no means isolated levers that can be activated independently. They all form part of an integrated system where elements influence and shape one another: investing in teacher-student relationship building can lay the required emotional safety foundation for differentiated instruction; a positive classroom atmosphere can amplify the impact of collaborative learning; effective home-school engagement can extend technology-enabled activities into family settings. This paper presents an original five-pillar conceptual framework that integrates all of these dimensions.

The five-pillar framework designed in this paper centres on mutual empowerment. None of its pillars can function effectively in isolation from the whole, and the overall value of the framework far exceeds the sum of its individual parts. Exhibit 3 will present the complete framework, as well as the quantifiable evaluation indicators for each pillar.

Exhibit 3: Five-Pillar Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Special Education Teaching

Pillar	Central Principle	Classroom-Level Actions	Measurable Indicators
Pillar 1 Relationship-Centred Teaching	Trust, respect, and emotional co-regulation form the precondition for learning	Individual check-ins, strength-based conversations, peer-pair introductions, personalised milestone celebrations	Student-reported sense of belonging; reduction in school-avoidance behaviour; teacher-student interaction frequency
Pillar 2 Inclusive Instructional Practices	Differentiation and flexible pacing respond to the full range of learner profiles	Tiered assignments, multi-modal content delivery, scaffolded inquiry, co-teaching arrangements	Task completion rates; learning gain measures; percentage of IEP goals met
Pillar 3 Positive Learning Environment	Physical and psychological safety unlocks curiosity and risk-taking	Sensory-conscious classroom design, restorative discipline practices, student choice boards	Behavioural incident frequency; classroom participation rates; student wellbeing surveys

Pillar	Central Principle	Classroom-Level Actions	Measurable Indicators
Pillar 4 Technology and Innovation	Purposeful technology reduces barriers and extends learning beyond the classroom	Assistive devices, educational apps aligned to learning objectives, flipped classroom modules, gamified review tools	Technology access equity; usage logs; digital task performance scores
Pillar 5 Family and Community Partnership	Shared accountability between school, home, and community multiplies intervention impact	Structured parent-teacher conferences, shared goal cards, community mentor programmes, multilingual communications	Parent engagement index; home practice consistency; community resource mobilisation rate

5.1 Pillar 1: Relationship-Centred Teaching

The first pillar of the multi-pillar educational framework proposed in this paper takes the quality of the teacher-student relationship as its core. Drawing on Rogers' 1969 humanistic education theory, this pillar argues that affective factors such as trust are the structural prerequisite for learning to occur. Students with special needs will not take learning risks if they lack a sense of security and connection. This pillar covers all relational practices set out in Section 4.1, and serves as the core foundation for all other pillars to be established.

5.2 Pillar 2: Inclusive Instructional Practices

The second pillar of inclusive education proposed in this paper centre's on translating abstract inclusive education principles into an implementable daily teaching framework. This pillar covers four categories of practice: differentiated learning, experiential learning, collaborative learning, and formative assessment. It is anchored to the core principles of the Universal Design for Learning framework released by CAST in 2018, and clarifies that merely placing students with special needs in mainstream classrooms does not qualify as inclusive education. Instead, teaching scenarios that accommodate the differences of all learners must be proactively designed.

5.3 Pillar 3: Positive Learning Environment

The third pillar of the educational framework originally developed in this paper canters on three core types of classroom conditions: physiological, social, and psychological. It clarifies that a positive learning environment has four key characteristics: safety, predictability, respect, and a sense of belonging. Building on the classroom atmosphere practices outlined in Section 4.2 and the SEL components introduced in Section 4.6 from earlier sections of this paper, it proposes that the instructional environment is itself an instructional tool, which can convey the values of inclusive education through three types of pathways.

5.4 Pillar 4: Technology and Innovation

The core of the fourth pillar of the educational equity framework constructed in this paper is to use goal-oriented technology as a tool to advance equity. This pillar links to the technology-enhanced learning strategy outlined in Section 4.5 of the preceding text, clarifies the principle that technology must reduce rather than create new learning barriers, and aligned with the context of the rapid iteration of digital environments, it requires teachers to receive sustained professional development to adapt to the technology application needs of students with special needs.

5.5 Pillar 5: Family and Community Partnership

The fifth pillar of inclusive education elaborated in this paper extends the boundaries of inclusive classrooms beyond the scope of schools. This pillar is proposed based on the research on family involvement sorted out in Section 4.8 earlier in this paper, which holds that students with special needs can only maximize their benefits when they receive active, consistently informed support from families, schools and communities. This pillar also reconstructs the roles of two types of stakeholders: teachers transition from the sole service provider to a coordinator, and families transition from passive recipients to active collaborators.

6. Implications for Stakeholders

The analytical framework proposed in this study can guide classroom teachers, school administrators, and education policymakers. Exhibit 4 will summarize the priority recommendations and supporting rationales for each of these groups.

Exhibit 4: Stakeholder Implications of the Inclusive Teaching Framework

Stakeholder Group	Priority Recommendations	Rationale
Classroom Teachers	Adopt flexible instructional approaches; prioritise strengths over deficits; design for active participation; integrate formative assessment into daily practice	Teachers are the primary architects of the inclusive experience; their beliefs and practices directly shape student engagement and learning outcomes
School Administrators	Invest in sustained teacher professional development; establish inclusive school policies; resource technology infrastructure; create collaborative planning time	Institutional support structures determine whether individual teacher effort scales into school-wide inclusive culture
Policymakers	Strengthen legal and resource frameworks for inclusive education; mandate pre-service and in-service training; incentivise innovation in special education pedagogy; align assessment systems with diverse learning profiles	Policy coherence between intent and resourcing is the single largest determinant of whether SDG 4 commitments translate into classroom realities

Source: Authors' synthesis

6.1 For Classroom Teachers

This paper identifies teachers as the primary builders of inclusive education experiences, requiring practitioners to move beyond their single function of content delivery, and expand their professional identities to encompass five compound professional roles including relationship builder and instructional designer. This highly challenging work requires three core types of support. Drawing on the 2016 study by Sharma & Sokal, we put forward differentiated training requirements for pre-service teacher education programs and in-service teachers respectively.

6.2 For School Administrators

This paper proposes that school leaders are the core entities that determine whether teachers' individual efforts in inclusive education can be translated into a school-wide culture of inclusion. The inclusive framework presented in this paper

applies to three major domains: policy development, resource allocation, and professional learning design; by drawing on the three practical requirements put forward by Ainscow (2020), and supplemented by co-teaching between general education and special education teachers, the core pillars of this framework can be advanced efficiently.

6.3 For Policymakers

This study proposes that the large-scale implementation of the inclusive education framework must rely on a coherent, sufficiently resourced policy system(Neeraja, B., et al. (2026). Core policy actions are divided into three categories by priority weight: First, strengthen the foundational legislative and regulatory framework to ensure that funding, curriculum standards, and assessments are adapted to serve diverse learners, preventing schools that enrol students with special needs from facing unintended penalties. Second, position full-cycle teacher professional development as the highest-leverage intervention. Third, advance the alignment of assessment and accountability systems with the values of inclusive education. Research from UNESCO (2020) and the United Nations (2015) both concludes that overly narrow standardised tests undermine institutional-level incentives for the on-the-ground implementation of inclusive education.

7. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This paper will contribute several unique academic values to the existing literature in the fields of inclusive education and special education pedagogy.

This study integrates four classic educational theories: constructivism, social learning theory, humanistic education, and universal learning design. These theories were previously only applied separately in special education, and this study is among the first pieces of research to build a unified theoretical foundation for integrated teaching in this field.

In the field of inclusive education, the five-pillar framework developed in this study is an original, integrative research output. It addresses the common research limitations found in existing reviews of inclusive education and clearly highlights the framework's core innovative contribution of filling the research blind spots in the field.

This study proposes a third core improvement: we set measurable indicators for each pillar of our own analytical framework. This addresses a common flaw in conceptual research within the field, transforming the framework into a model that can be evaluated and can support empirical testing.

As the fourth core conclusion of this study, the authors of this paper present a differentiated analysis of the inclusive education framework for three categories of stakeholders—teachers, school administrators, and policymakers, to solve the difficult cross-level implementation challenge that cannot be advanced by relying solely on classroom-based interventions.

8. Conclusion

Effective teaching for students with special educational needs is far from a simple application of general teaching competencies; it requires the development of classrooms that can equally address students' academic, emotional, social, and developmental needs. The five-pillar framework proposed in this paper can provide structured theoretical support for this type of classroom.

The core claim of the inclusive classroom support framework proposed in this paper is: the formation of an inclusive classroom does not rely on a single strategy; it requires five pillars—relationship-centered teaching, inclusive practices, positive environment, adaptive technology, and home-school-community collaboration—to be coherently aligned, and work in concert to support students with special needs to achieve academic success and social-emotional development, as well as cultivate core competencies for lifelong learning.

Education systems across all countries globally are continuously strengthening their

commitments to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), and it is urgently necessary to translate inclusive schooling from a conceptual ideal into on-the-ground practice. This paper has proposed a response framework for this issue that integrates both conceptual rigour and practical applicability. Three follow-up studies need to be conducted: empirical verification of the framework across diverse contextual settings, analysis of the contribution level of each of the framework's pillars, and exploration of the optimal professional learning conditions that support teachers to implement the framework in practice.

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