



Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 5 (2026), pp. 141-160
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/80t5dx84>



Rethinking Inclusive Education in Saudi Arabia: Implementation and Cultural Contexts

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores how the concept of inclusion is interpreted and implemented within the context of Saudi Arabian educational policies and cultural contexts, with a focus on the perspectives of Saudi elementary school teachers regarding the challenges involved in adapting Western inclusion models. Through qualitative interviews with five educators working in elementary schools in Riyadh with inclusive education programs, key themes emerged: (a) partial integration of evidence-based practices, (b) Caution toward foreign IE materials, and (c) the lack of culturally appropriate and adapted strategies for the implementation of inclusion. The participants' responses underscore fundamental challenges to transferring foreign frameworks without substantial adaptation and highlight the importance of developing culturally responsive policies. Recommendations include enhancing collaboration between policymakers and educators to support the consistent, sustainable, and equitable implementation of inclusive education in Saudi Arabia.*

Keywords: Inclusive education, sustainability, culturally responsive, policy adaptation, teacher perspectives, Saudi context.

Received: Oct 23, 2025 | **Revised:** Jan 1, 2026 | **Accepted:** Feb 22, 2026

How to Cite (APA): Alkhunini, A. (2026). Rethinking inclusive education in Saudi Arabia: Implementation and cultural contexts. *Journal of International Students*, 15(9), 141-160. doi.org/4453.3e54.454d

Academic Editors: Dr. Muhammad Imran, Prince Sultan University, Saudi Arabia | Dr. Norah Almusharraf, Prince Sultan University, Saudi Arabia

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, global leaders committed to a transformative agenda for sustainable development, encapsulated in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). Central to this agenda is the fourth item on the list, which prioritizes the provision of quality education in a way that is both fair and inclusive, with a focus on ensuring inclusive education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, including those with disabilities. The commitment to this goal underscores the global consensus that it is necessary to provide equal access to quality learning for all, in part through the guarantee of free education from K–12 through higher education by 2030 (Ainscow et al., 2019).

Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a strong commitment to achieving these goals through innovative approaches outlined in its national vision, Vision 2030, which strongly resonates with the global goals for inclusion by emphasizing high-quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). In response to this vision and the Incheon Declaration, the Saudi Ministry of Education (MOE) initiated significant reforms in 2016 through a pilot inclusive education (IE) program in six elementary schools where students with disabilities are taught side-by-side with their peers without disabilities in general education classrooms. This marked a pivotal shift in the country from traditional segregated special education settings toward broader inclusion.

The successful implementation of IE is widely recognized as being heavily dependent on the attitudes of teachers and administrators toward individuals with disabilities, as well as the beliefs of such professionals in their own ability to facilitate inclusion (Aldosari, 2022, 2024; Florian, 2019). Other factors also influence the effective implementation of IE, including the availability of relevant resources, such as specialized teaching tools, dedicated IE curricula, and adequate classroom support staff (Oliva, 2016). The integration of IE models into university teacher education curricula for preservice teachers and professional development opportunities for in-service teachers are also fundamental (Ainscow et al., 2020; Alkhunini, 2025). Taken together, these findings indicate that the success of IE in classrooms largely depends on teachers' values, beliefs, and commitment to adopting innovative pedagogical approaches (Carrington et al., 2024; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The conceptual framework of IE has evolved significantly since its emergence in the 1990s, moving from a narrow focus on disability integration to a broader understanding of educational equity and social justice (Woolfson, 2024). It is now recognized as a process of addressing and responding to the

diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, culture, and communities while reducing exclusion within and from education (Ainscow et al., 2020). This definition highlights the need for systemic change rather than mere accommodation of individual differences within existing structures, a perspective that has important implications for comparative methodology.

The theoretical underpinnings of IE draw from multiple disciplines, including special education, sociology, and human rights frameworks, creating a complex theoretical landscape that requires sophisticated methodological approaches to analyze and compare (Oliver, 1996). The social model of disability, as articulated by Oliver (1996), provides a crucial foundation by shifting focus to societal barriers that prevent the full participation of individuals, emphasizing the importance of creating conditions that enable all individuals to develop to their full potential. Different frameworks can be employed to further address students' diverse needs and promote equitable academic success. For example, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an instructional approach that recognizes the central role of students' cultural contexts in shaping learning and integrates these cultural experiences into all aspects of teaching, including programming for students with disabilities (Yeh, 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977, 1979) offers another essential theoretical lens for understanding IE implementation across cultural contexts. This framework recognizes that educational outcomes are influenced by multiple interconnected systems, from the immediate classroom environment (microsystem) to broader cultural and policy contexts (macrosystem). The application of this theory to comparative IE research allows for the consideration of cultural factors, family dynamics, community attitudes, and policy frameworks when implementation processes are analyzed across different contexts. Bronfenbrenner's work emphasizes that IE does not negate the need for specialized support but rather requires the integration of special education expertise within the inclusive framework.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the current study, which examines how different cultural contexts negotiate the relationship between specialized and inclusive approaches to education. In the Saudi context, Almughyiri (2025) demonstrated that preservice special education teachers' career choices and professional orientations are strongly shaped by family encouragement, religious values, and community expectations. These factors, embedded within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, directly affect how teachers perceive their roles and adopt teaching practices that align with their cultural and religious norms.

Therefore, this study aimed to obtain a deep understanding of elementary school teachers' views regarding the implementation of Western IE frameworks in the Saudi Arabian context. To conduct a nuanced analysis of how cultural factors influence the adaptation and implementation of such frameworks, an interpretive approach was utilized. By focusing on participants' lived experiences within a comparative framework, it was then possible to address identified gaps in the understanding of specific challenges and successes encountered by

elementary school teachers in Saudi Arabia as they navigated the complexities of IE.

Special and IE in Saudi Arabia

In the mid-1990s, Saudi Arabia began to move toward a model of educating those with disabilities in dedicated special education classrooms inside public general education schools. This transformation was inspired largely by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 1994 Salamanca Statement. This is reflected in Saudi's Regulations of Special Education Programs and Institutes of 2001, which was the nation's first official policy framework addressing the education of people with disabilities. This policy underscores the importance of educating learners in the least restrictive environment, encouraging progress toward more inclusive school systems. However, under this model, interactions between students with and without disabilities are limited primarily to social and recreational settings, such as recess and extracurricular activities (Gulf Arab States Educational Research Center, 2021). This model cannot be classified as "inclusive," as it preserves segregation within the learning environment (Ainscow, 2020; Aldabas, 2020).

In 2016, Vision 2030 reinforced the promotion of inclusive education and employment for people with disabilities to increase their independence and societal integration (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Accordingly, the Saudi government launched a nationwide educational reform agenda to establish a more inclusive framework. This initiative aimed to enhance teacher professional development, update curricula, expand classroom support for diverse learners, and integrate digital technologies into teaching and learning practices. More recently, the Saudi government established the 2023 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, which sets comprehensive measures to ensure equal access for individuals with disabilities (The Care of People with Disabilities [APD], 2023). However, this act still does not implement full inclusion in Saudi schools.

Most practical efforts to address the IE gap in the country have been driven by Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Another central component of this reform was a collaboration between the MOE and the Talemia Company to drive improvements across different education services. To clarify, Talemia is a subsidiary of the Tatweer Education Holding Company, a government entity established to oversee educational initiatives in Saudi countries; within the country, the entire IE effort is sometimes referred to as "Talemia" by educators. Through this collaboration, Saudi educators received training and technical support both domestically and at the University of Oregon. These professional development initiatives emphasize theoretical foundations, research, and hands-on strategies for implementing IE programs (Division of Global Engagement, 2015). While detailed information about the partnership is limited, the collaboration resulted in a series of technical manuals designed to guide IE implementation in Saudi schools (Talemia, 2016a, 2016b). These manuals detail standards for physical accessibility, assistive technologies, and pedagogical

approaches tailored to students with special educational needs and disabilities (Al Tayyar, 2015).

During the 2016/2017 academic year, pilot IE programs were introduced in six public schools as part of this reform effort. The goal was to align Saudi Arabia's education system with international standards promoting equity and inclusion and to transition from the traditional segregated classroom approach to a comprehensive IE model (Al Tayyar, 2015; United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). These programs were guided by the two guides, which outline practical steps for establishing inclusive classrooms; these items will be collectively referred to as the "IE Manuals" throughout this article (Talemia, 2016a, 2016b).

Use of Evidence-Based Practices

The emphasis on evidence-based practices (EBPs) in special education has grown substantially over the past two decades, particularly in the United States, driven by legislative requirements and professional standards that require the implementation of scientifically validated interventions (Basckin et al., 2021). However, most of the research supporting these practices has been conducted in Western contexts, primarily in North America. This raises important questions about their applicability and effectiveness when they are transferred to other cultural settings, such as Saudi Arabia.

When U.S. educational frameworks and EBPs are transferred to the Saudi context, it is important to acknowledge that these practices are often developed under specific cultural, linguistic, and contextual conditions. While these interventions demonstrate effectiveness in their original settings, their direct application in Saudi elementary schools may not adequately account for unique cultural factors, educational philosophies, and local practices. Furthermore, this process must also consider Saudi teachers' perceptions of the practices included in the IE Manuals and the overall Talemia initiative. Specifically, participants' insights reflect concerns that the assumptions embedded within Western EBPs differ from indigenous Saudi educational approaches and cultural nuances in teaching.

The effective implementation of U.S.-derived EBPs in Saudi Arabia, therefore, requires careful consideration of which core components must be maintained for effectiveness and which surface features can be adapted to the local context. This distinction is not always straightforward and necessitates an understanding of how these practices resonate with or challenge existing Saudi educational norms and teachers' professional and personal experiences. The successful integration of these frameworks depends on an approach that respects local knowledge systems and traditional practices rather than simply replacing them.

The cultural adaptation of Western EBPs in Saudi Arabia, therefore, involves more than just translation; it requires deep engagement with how these practices align with or diverge from the prevailing educational culture and the practical realities faced by elementary school teachers. Understanding teachers' perspectives on the Talemia initiative and how it integrates and is influenced by

Western-origin EBPs is essential for fostering sustainable and effective IE in the Saudi Arabian context.

Rationale for the Study

The successful implementation of IE is contingent upon a range of systemic factors, including policy, resources, teacher development, and the beliefs held by educators (Ainscow, 2020). These elements are widely recognized as integral to effective inclusion and provide a theoretical framework for understanding the complexities of adapting foreign IE frameworks within diverse cultural contexts. The global commitment to IE, as enshrined in the United Nation's fourth SDG, further underscores the imperative to understand how these frameworks are enacted at the grassroots level, particularly in elementary schools (United Nations, 2015).

While there is a substantial international body of research on IE, the transferability and effectiveness of Western frameworks and associated EBPs to non-Western contexts, especially within the unique cultural and educational landscape of Saudi Arabia, remain relatively underexplored (Kumari et al., 2024). Previous research in Saudi and elsewhere has highlighted that the successful integration of students with disabilities into general education classrooms relies heavily on teachers' attitudes, their belief in their capacity to facilitate inclusion, and the availability of appropriate resources and professional development (Alkhunini, 2025; Oliva, 2016). The MOE's 2016 initiative signifies a pivotal shift, making the perspectives of elementary school teachers key to understanding this process.

This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by focusing on Saudi elementary school teachers' perspectives on the implementation of Western IE frameworks. It seeks to gain a deep understanding of their experiences, challenges, and successes as they navigate this significant educational transformation. By exploring teachers' perceptions of such practices within the context of the materials developed through the Talemia Company's collaboration with the University of Oregon, the research sheds light on the cultural factors that shape the adaptation and implementation of foreign IE frameworks and EBPs and seeks to provide an understanding of the practical realities faced by these educators.

Through obtaining substantial insights from Saudi elementary school teachers, we aim to present meaningful, contextually relevant perspectives that can guide national education reform initiatives and contribute to the global conversation on IE in culturally diverse contexts. To this end, the main research question guiding this study was "How do elementary school teachers in Saudi Arabia perceive the adaptation and implementation of Western IE frameworks?" This main question was extended by three sub questions: (a) How are evidence-based practices (EBPs) applied in Saudi classrooms to support students with disabilities, and how effective are they in practice? ; (b) Are guidelines outlined in IE Manuals (e.g., IEPs, strategies) implemented in everyday classroom

practices? (c) How do school culture and community attitudes influence the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies?

METHOD

Before the study commenced, ethical approval was secured from the Saudi MOE, which subsequently supplied contact details for the administrators of three boys' elementary schools. Using this information, the principals of these schools were contacted and asked for permission to recruit staff members to participate in the research. Additional ethical approval was obtained from the IMSIU University Ethics Committee to ensure compliance with established research protocols. In addition, owing to the limited number of individuals eligible to participate in the study and the small number of IE pilot programs available for recruitment, steps were taken to prevent deductive disclosure of identity. Among these measures were the use of pseudonyms, the choice of study setting, and the decision to limit the amount of data on individual demographic characteristics presented in this paper (Pascale et al., 2022).

Research Design

An interpretive qualitative approach was employed to meet the study's aims, enabling an in-depth exploration of teachers' views on implementing IE and adopting foreign frameworks and practices in the Saudi context (Creswell, 2012). By centering participants' lived experience, the interpretive design enabled examination of how policymakers implement the IE agenda in Saudi schools and interpretation, from teachers' perspectives, of the barriers, opportunities, and resource and leadership gaps affecting IE.

Setting and Participants

Setting

At the time of data collection, there were only limited fully inclusive programs in Saudi, as implementation was only in the early stages. Therefore, the investigation focused on Riyadh, Saudi's largest city and capital, to ensure a suitable population of potential participants. Data collection took place in the 2023/2024 academic year, when six public elementary schools in Riyadh were operating pilot IE initiatives with one inclusive classroom in each grade (grades 1–6). Each school included approximately 800 students; approximately 30 students per school (~3.75% of the student body) were identified as students with disabilities, most commonly autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disability. Each school's leadership team included a principal and two supervisors, one of whom oversaw the six IE classrooms. Each school comprises 20 classrooms: 14 regular general education classrooms without students with disabilities and six IE classrooms (one per grade) where students with and without disabilities are taught together.

Each IE classroom has two teachers (a general education teacher and a special education teacher) and approximately 30 students, including four or five students with disabilities and approximately 25 without. Students attended the same lessons from arrival to dismissal, followed the same timetable, and participated in the same learning activities. Special education teachers provide targeted support, particularly in subjects such as mathematics and science. Extracurricular activities are open to all students, with special education teachers providing direct support to students with disabilities. Psychologists are employed at each school, but no teaching assistants were present in the pilot IE classrooms during the study.

This pilot arrangement contrasts with typical practices in most Saudi elementary schools, where students with disabilities spend the majority of the day in segregated special education classrooms and only join peers for brief periods, such as assemblies or breaks. Owing to the gender segregation of Saudis, the six pilot schools included three boys' and three girls' schools. Since the authors are male, the recruitment focused on the three boys' schools. In Saudi Arabia, the MOE is responsible for hiring teachers, paying salaries, providing resources, overseeing the curriculum, and organizing professional development. With respect to the IE pilots, the MOE's partner, Talemia, shares supervisory duties and works with the MOE to deliver teacher training and guidelines.

Participant

The literature on qualitative interview methods indicates that theoretical saturation can be achieved with as few as 5 participants or as many as 13–25, depending on the context (Creswell, 2012; Guest et al., 2006). Following these guidelines, we determined that interviews with five participants would yield sufficiently rich, meaningful, and reflective data for the purposes of the study. To obtain an appropriate sample, purposive sampling was used, and the following inclusion criteria were established: (a) general education teachers, special education teachers, or IE supervisors; (b) currently employed at one of the three public elementary boys' schools in Riyadh with a pilot IE program; (c) actively involved in either teaching in an IE classroom or supervising an IE program; (d) having at least 1 year of teaching experience; and (e) having regular, direct interaction with students with disabilities in the IE setting. The authors followed ethical procedures throughout the recruitment process (e.g., full project explanation, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality).

The contact information for eligible staff was obtained from each school's administrator. Of the 20 individuals invited, five consented to participate; these five worked across two of the three schools. Each participant was contacted individually and interviewed at a mutually convenient time; interview questions were emailed to participants 1 week before their interview. To protect privacy, pseudonyms were used, the data were secured confidentially, and the participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without explanation or penalty. For ease of reference during the analysis, each participant received a generic label (Teacher 1, Teacher 2, etc.). All identifying names and school numbers were omitted from reporting to preserve anonymity, an especially

important safeguard given the small number of inclusive schools in Saudi Arabia and the sensitivity of the information shared about school leaders, the MOE, and the Talemia Company. The demographic details are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Pseudonym	Designation	Education	Total yrs teaching	IE Exp. (yrs)	Teaching Exp. SWDs (yrs)	Training in IE (Y/N)
Teacher 1	SE teacher	BA in SE	5	1	5	Y
Teacher 2	SE teacher	BA in SE & Master's SE	11	2	11	N
Teacher 3	GE teacher	BSc in mathematics	16	1	1	N
Teacher 4	GE teacher	BA in Islamic studies	8	1	1	N
Teacher 5	IE supervisor	BA in SE	6	3	6	Y

Note. *SE* = special education. *GE* = general education. *BA* = Bachelor of Art *SWDs* = students with disabilities.

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were gathered via semi structured, audio-recorded interviews to faithfully capture participants’ responses. The first author conducted each interview, and the second author reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. A standardized interview guide, developed from an extensive literature review and aligned with the study aims, was used to promote consistency. The guide contained four principal questions, each supported by multiple follow-up prompts to elicit further detail as needed. The interviews lasted 30–45 min and were held in the teachers’ breakrooms at the two schools.

To ensure that the questions were clear and encouraged full responses, prompts such as “in your opinion” and “what do you think?” were used (Bryman, 2016). The interview topics included the transfer of international inclusive practices into the Saudi setting, and the strategies teachers viewed as culturally appropriate within the pilot programs. The interviewer recorded field notes to document impressions, reflections, and contextual observations during the interviews; these were used to supplement and inform the analysis (Creswell, 2012). All four primary open-ended questions included five or six optional follow-up prompts, which were designed to elicit more detailed information when the participants offered brief responses.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the dataset, offering a flexible, systematic method for identifying patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo (Version 2020) was used to support data organization, coding, and theme development, maintaining a consistent and transparent analytic workflow. The final findings were organized around the principal themes that emerged and were discussed in relation to related literature to focus on influences and implications (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each participant received the Arabic transcript of their interview for member checking (respondent validation) and was asked to confirm its accuracy.

The transcripts were subsequently translated into English by bilingual experts to preserve their linguistic and cultural meaning. The analysis proceeded iteratively: both authors independently read and reread the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data, generated initial codes to flag salient features, and grouped related codes into candidate themes on the basis of recurrence and relevance across transcripts, field notes, and documents. The authors compared their independent analyses and refined the themes through discussion until the themes accurately represented the participants' experiences.

Validity and Reliability

Several measures were implemented to strengthen credibility and transparency. Triangulation was achieved by using several data resources in the analysis, i.e., interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, to enable cross-verification of the themes (Creswell, 2012). An audit trail was kept documenting analytic steps from initial coding to final theme selection, providing transparency and supporting duplicability. Analytic decisions were also recorded to confirm them and assess the rigor of the process (Creswell, 2012; Shenton, 2004).

RESULTS

Three core themes were identified through the analysis of the data and reinforced by the information gathered from the field observation notes and the official IE manuals. These themes, which are discussed in detail below, were (a) partial implementation of EBPs, (b) Caution toward foreign IE materials, and (c) disconnection between strategies and school/community culture. As illustrated in Figure 1, these themes summarize the major themes emerging from the data.

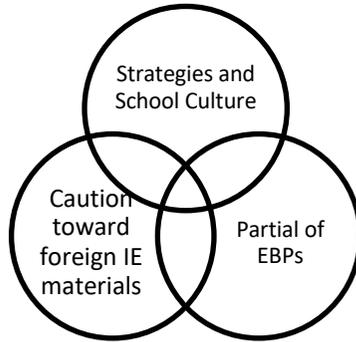


Figure 1: Themes Found in the Qualitative Analysis

Partial Implementation of EBPs

The first major theme revealed significant inconsistencies in the application of EBPs among teachers and across settings. While some participants acknowledged the importance of using research-supported interventions, actual application in inclusive classrooms was reported as sporadic and incomplete. The study's special education teachers demonstrated familiarity with EBPs, particularly visual and communication strategies commonly used with students with autism spectrum disorder. These teachers reported employing visual support, structured communication systems, and behavioral interventions consistent with recognized EBPs. However, even among special education teachers, implementation often involves adaptations or modifications, which could affect intervention fidelity.

In contrast, general education teachers largely relied on traditional teaching methods with minimal adaptation for students with disabilities. Teacher 4 said, No, I stick to the standard teaching method [lecturing and asking questions], while the special education teacher employs different techniques for the [students with autism spectrum disorder]. I am not familiar with EBPs; it is simply not realistic to dedicate extended time to every student on the spectrum. My role is to instruct the entire class and oversee the assessment of all the learners.

This statement highlights how role definitions and professional responsibilities influence implementation patterns, with a clear division between special and general educators. Special education teachers are primarily responsible for students with disabilities, while general education teachers use traditional approaches to teach the rest of the class. This separation undermines collaborative IE principles.

Practical constraints, such as large class sizes and curriculum demands, were identified as significant systemic barriers to EBP implementation. Teacher 3's concern about being "responsible for the evaluation of all students" suggests that accountability systems might inadvertently discourage teachers from dedicating additional time to students who require more intensive support.

Caution toward foreign IE materials

The second significant theme identified was the considerable underutilization of the IE materials. Despite substantial investment in developing comprehensive guidance materials, most participants demonstrated limited engagement with them. Only two of the five reported having examined the manuals in detail. This suggests that the effectiveness of implementation may be compromised by limitations in resource utilization, such as a lack of awareness and accessibility, or by teachers' perceptions of the relevance of such materials.

Teachers indicated that while they were aware of the manuals, many had not received adequate orientation or training on how to use them effectively. More critically, some educators actively chose not to engage with the materials because of their foreign origins, reflecting concerns about the appropriateness of externally developed resources for the Saudi context. For instance, Teacher 2 explicitly stated that he refused to read the manuals because they originated from a foreign university, highlighting how cultural identity and professional autonomy influence receptivity to new educational initiatives.

Furthermore, the quality and accessibility of the manuals themselves emerged as barriers. Multiple participants described the materials as overwhelming and difficult to navigate (Teachers 2 and 5). One characterized the manuals as "a huge guide, it is unclear, and it is translated," pointing to issues with both the volume of information and the quality of the English-to-Arabic translation (Teacher 5). This suggests that the translation issues extended beyond mere linguistic concerns to encompass deeper questions about cultural meaning and relevance, where the materials failed to capture meaning accurately within the Arabic language and Saudi cultural contexts.

Disconnect between IE Strategies and School/Community Culture

During the interviews, the teachers expressed significant criticism of the implementation approach described in the IE Manuals, particularly regarding the perceived lack of cultural adaptation (Teachers 1 and 4). The strategies were viewed as not relating to Saudi culture or Islamic values. Teacher 4 explicitly stated, "Nothing about Islam and our culture has been included in those manuals."

This reflects fundamental concerns about the compatibility of Western educational approaches with Islamic principles and Saudi cultural values. Such criticisms extended beyond the materials to the entire approach to program development. With respect to the Talemia Company's methodology, Teacher 2 stated the following:

The Department of Special Education is dedicated and provides valuable support, but the employees of Talemia [who manage the program] are not performing. Their primary function seems to be duplicating documents from an overseas university and imposing them on our schools; honestly, they are not contributing any real work

This perception suggests that the adaptation process was viewed as superficial and mechanical rather than thoughtful and culturally responsive. This participant further elaborated:

The inclusion strategy they used was directly adopted from a university outside Saudi Arabia, and that model is somewhat irrelevant to our local context. I am not against ideas that were created outside Saudi Arabia—I know many of those individuals are experts in the field—but if the goal is to implement real inclusion, then comprehensive and easily understood operational guides must be provided.

This finding indicates that resistance to the IE Manuals and process was not a wholesale rejection of international expertise but rather a concern about the appropriateness of direct transfer without adequate cultural adaptation. The emphasis on “manuals that can be understood” encompasses both linguistic accessibility and cultural relevance within the Saudi educational system.

This disconnect also manifested in concerns about practical implementation within existing school structures and community expectations. Teachers reported that many recommended strategies conflict with established practices, parental expectations, and administrative requirements, creating tension for educators tasked with implementing new approaches while adhering to existing systems and stakeholder expectations.

DISCUSSION

In view of these findings, it is evident that while Saudi Arabia is making progress toward inclusion through the implementation of pilot IE classrooms in selected schools, at the very least, teachers have legitimate concerns regarding the lack of culturally relevant practices and adaptations being proposed for use in these pilot programs and, in the future, across the country as a whole. The swift transition toward IE in Saudi schools may have contributed to the challenges identified in this study. The IE project introduced a new framework that entailed extensive administrative and logistical adjustments, placing considerable demands on teachers to implement these tools in a culturally appropriate way, without providing any training or direction regarding how to do so.

The first two themes, regarding the limited implementation of EBPs and limited use of the IE Manuals, are direct consequences of the third theme. The vast majority of the research supporting these EBPs originates from Western/North American contexts, as noted by Basckin et al. (2021). The responses of the teachers in this study indicate that the direct application of these externally developed frameworks does not adequately account for the unique cultural factors, educational philosophies, and local practices of Saudi society. This perceived lack of relevance and applicability leads to natural hesitation to fully adopt prescribed practices. This challenge is not merely one of the qualities of the translations but of conceptual and pedagogical alignment, a gap that is exacerbated by a lack of training on how to bridge this cultural divide.

This disconnect is powerfully illuminated by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1977). The IE Manuals, developed externally, represent a change

imposed at the macrosystem level (policy and overarching educational philosophy). However, their effectiveness is contingent upon their successful integration within the microsystem (classroom and teacher–student interactions) and the mesosystem (relationships between the school, families, and the community). These systems are deeply embedded in Saudi cultural and religious norms. The teachers' insights reveal significant friction at this interface, where the imported macrosystem-level changes clash with the realities of the local microsystem. The call to consider indigenous approaches in developing inclusive practices and directives within the country reflects teachers' recognition that the inclusive framework should resonate with and be adapted to the immediate ecological environment rather than simply replace it.

Furthermore, this disconnect has significant implications when viewed through the lens of the social model of disability, which posits that disability is the result of societal barriers (Oliver, 1996). By importing a framework without sufficient cultural adaptation, the initiative risks creating new barriers. If teachers feel that the prescribed methods are incongruent with their cultural values and pedagogical instincts and if students and families find the approaches unfamiliar or alienating, the educational environment itself becomes a barrier to full participation. This contradicts the very essence of the social model. This idea is reinforced by Almughyiri's (2025) findings, which state that family, religion, and community are powerful shapers of teacher identity and practice in Saudi Arabia. An effective inclusive model cannot ignore these foundational cultural structures; it must leverage them as a basis for creating a truly supportive and enabling educational environment.

Specifically, the findings underscore that the success of IE is not merely a matter of policy adoption or resource allocation but critically depends on the cultural embeddedness of pedagogical practices. The absence of explicit guidance or training on how to integrate indigenous educational approaches with imported EBPs leaves teachers ill equipped to navigate the complexities of a truly inclusive educational environment. The authors thus conclude that for IE to be genuinely effective and sustainable in Saudi Arabia, a more nuanced and culturally informed approach to curriculum development, material adaptation, and teacher professional development is imperative.

IMPLICATIONS

Therefore, the core implication of the study is that the current unidirectional implementation model, which expects teachers to adapt to a foreign framework, is insufficient. This situation highlights the critical need for a bidirectional adaptation process. Such a process involves not only adapting foreign frameworks to the Saudi context but also formally recognizing, documenting, and integrating local knowledge and indigenous practices into the national IE model. The lack of teacher training in performing these cultural adaptations is a systemic failure that leaves them unequipped for this complex task. Ultimately, the success of IE in Saudi Arabia hinges not on the simple provision of manuals and resources but on the system's capacity to foster a genuine, collaborative integration of global best

practices with local cultural wisdom. These findings indicate that IE training must be integrated into both teacher education programs and professional development opportunities to better prepare both pre- and in-service teachers to facilitate IE in Saudi Arabian schools.

Conclusion

The study participants identified several factors that affect their ability to take the IE manuals, which were developed outside of the country, and apply them appropriately in the IE setting of their pilot classrooms. Additionally, the participants' insights into the cultural incongruence of these externally developed materials and the lack of adequate training in culturally responsive pedagogy emerged as significant barriers. This highlights a fundamental challenge in implementing IE in Saudi Arabia: the assumption that educational frameworks and EBPs developed in one cultural context can be transferred and applied effectively in another without substantial adaptation. This suggests that the current implementation model may inadvertently perpetuate a form of cultural assimilation rather than genuine inclusion, where students with disabilities are expected to adapt to a foreign educational paradigm rather than having the system adapt to their diverse needs within their own cultural context.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers meaningful insights into teachers' perceptions of IE implementation in Saudi schools, several limitations must be acknowledged. The foremost limitation concerns the small sample size, which severely constrains the generalizability of the results. The perspectives of only five educators from selected schools implementing IE cannot fully represent the broader population of Saudi teachers. This limitation is exacerbated by the fact that only participants from boys' elementary schools with IE programs in the city were included. The inclusion of both male and female educators would offer a more gender-balanced and representative perspective on the evolving implementation of IE in Saudi Arabia; thus, future research should recruit participants from girls' elementary schools.

In addition, other studies could draw from a larger number of schools by recruiting participants from, for example, any public elementary school that offers special education programming in the city. Since it is the largest city in Saudi, the setting of Riyadh is also a limitation, as our participants were employed in urban schools, which are likely to provide greater access to resources than institutions in rural or less developed regions are. Pilot programs are being implemented in other cities; thus, other studies could include all schools in the country with such programs and focus on less urban settings. We focused on elementary schools, which are currently where IE pilot programs are being implemented in Saudi countries. However, it is important that similar studies be conducted in other school settings, such as at the middle and high school levels.

A further limitation lies in participant recruitment and potential response bias. Although every precaution was taken to ensure anonymity and protect participants' confidentiality, initial contact had to be made through school principals to gain permission for recruitment. As a result, it is possible that the participant pool was restricted because some eligible individuals chose not to participate. This factor might also have limited the insights provided by the participants because those who agreed may have moderated their responses for personal or professional reasons.

Finally, despite the importance of understanding the challenges of contextualizing Western-based inclusion frameworks for use in Saudi schools, the modest scope and scale of this research meant that it could not fully capture the complexity of systemic barriers or the diverse perspectives of all relevant stakeholders. To deepen the understanding and improve the application of IE practices in the Saudi context, further research is warranted. Future studies should aim for larger, more diverse samples to enhance generalizability and provide a more comprehensive overview of teachers' and administrators' experiences.

Funding Statement

This work was supported and funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU) (grant number IMSIU-DDRSP2602).

Declaration of competing interests

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for editing and proofreading during the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments

The author sincerely thanks all the participants who participated in this study.

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