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Inclusive pedagogies in multilingual classrooms: teachers' perspectives on supporting students with learning disabilities

Jin Zhang[a], Ashifa Kariveliparambil[b], K.G. Jeena [c], Jobi Babu[d], Joby Cyriac[e] and Muhammad Shakil Ahmad[f]

[a]College of International Cooperation, Xi'an International University, Xi'an, People's Republic of China; [b]Faculty of Health Science, Istanbul Gelisim University, Istanbul, Turkiye; [c]Dept. of Education, Regional Institute of Education (NCERT), Bhubaneswar, India; [d]School of Social Work, Marian College Kuttikkanam (Autonomous), Kerala, India; [e]Department of English, Marian College Kuttikkanam (Autonomous), Kerala, India; [f]Teesside University International Business School, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in linguistically plural societies is often negotiated in a contested space between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. This qualitative study shows how language-subject teachers in Kerala (India) conceptualise and enact the inclusion of learners with difficulties in a tri-lingual milieu comprising Malayalam, English, and Hindi. With an interpretivist design and abductive logic, we conducted interviews with 20 teachers and analyzed their responses using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Five themes emerged: (1) teachers' understanding of inclusive education, (2) challenges in implementing inclusive education, (3) challenges in multilingual inclusive classrooms, (4) institutional and policy support, and (5) teachers' reflections on and future directions. The findings show that teachers routinely mobilise translanguaging and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to remove barriers to presence, participation, and achievement. However, these gains are rendered 'invisible' when examinations reward monolingual written outputs. This study advances the theory by integrating the inclusive education framework with translanguaging, biliteracy continua, UDL, and orthographic-depth accounts to explain the persistent oral–written gap. It advocates for the redesign of assessments, state-endorsed oral fluency scales, script-sensitive rubrics, portfolio-based evidence, protected remedial time, and proximal professional development. These shifts would convert teacher-observed progress into recognised achievement and stabilise inclusion beyond individual goodwill.

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Introduction

The global movement towards inclusive education has reshaped the understanding of equity in schooling by insisting that all learners, regardless of ability, language, or socio-economic background, must be able to participate meaningfully in classroom life (Ainscow 2020; Pradhan and Naik 2024; Sengupta et al. 2019). Recent evidence from linguistically diverse contexts confirms that multilingual education is essential for achieving quality and inclusive learning (UNESCO 2024). In linguistically diverse contexts, the challenges of inclusion intersect with the politics of language (Hossain 2024; McKinney and Norton 2008; Volknant and Licandro 2024). Learning disabilities can be an obstacle in education. Language is not a simple medium of instruction for

CONTACT Ashifa Kariveliparambil ashifakattur@gmail.com

students with disabilities. However, this is the ground on which inclusion occurs or is denied (Fitas 2025; Zhang 2021). In multilingual societies such as India, English, Hindi, and regional languages like Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada are positioned in a hierarchical structure that influences access to the curriculum, assessment, education, and social mobility (Iyer and Ramachandran 2019; Lightfoot et al. 2021). Kerala is one of India's most socially progressive and high-performing educational systems, boasting near-universal literacy, substantial public investment in education, and a long history of social reform movements that support equitable education (Rathore and Das 2019; Ratnam 2020). In Kerala, Malayalam serves as the predominant home and regional language, while Hindi and English primarily function as the languages of instruction under the state's trilingual education policy. However, this trilingual framework reflects policy architecture rather than lived linguistic reality. Kerala's classrooms often encompass a more complex multilingual ecology, including diverse Malayalam dialects, Tamil-speaking border populations, tribal languages, and the languages of internal migrants. These linguistic realities shape teachers' classroom decisions and complicate the practice of inclusive language education. As Volknant and Licandro (2024) note, Indian language policy frequently oversimplifies linguistic diversity by presuming one dominant language per state, thereby marginalising speakers of minority languages. Subsequent research into multilingual classrooms showed that this complex linguistic diversity becomes more challenging to navigate when teachers are insufficiently prepared to handle it. Only 37% of early-career teachers felt well-prepared for multilingual settings, and only 7% of secondary teachers had received relevant professional development (OECD 2025). It is, therefore, necessary to understand how teachers perceive linguistic diversity in order to transform it into pedagogical tools, enabling authentic inclusion (Mouboua, Atobatele, and Akintayo 2024).

Inclusive education is not simply about providing an environment for learning together, but about creating a shared learning space where differences are welcomed and adequately addressed. This becomes possible when teachers have a positive attitude. Recent scholarship emphasises that multilingual classrooms serve as pathways for inclusive education by preserving the spoken languages of children with diverse needs, while promoting development, communication skills, and cultural appreciation (Dhull 2025). Inclusive education is not simply about placing learners in mainstream classrooms but about restructuring pedagogies and assessments to ensure participation (Fettes and Karamouzian 2018; Wevelsiep 2019). Disability studies frame it as a project of social justice, challenging deficit-based practices that marginalise learners (Graham et al. 2018). In multilingual classrooms, learning disabilities and language hierarchies are intertwined (Erling et al. 2022; McKinney and Norton 2008). A child labelled dyslexic in English may demonstrate competence in decoding Malayalam or Hindi; however, such skills are undervalued because of the privilege of English (Lithari 2021). This dynamic calls for resistance to universalised templates of inclusion and pedagogies grounded in local knowledge and lived realities, particularly for low-income English learners often mislabelled as disabled (Kalyanpur 2020). Contemporary research demonstrates that assessment practices continue to perpetuate these inequities, with studies revealing higher rates of misidentification when multilingual learners are assessed only in English, underscoring the urgent need for dual-language assessment approaches (Solano-Flores et al. 2024). Educators are thus urged to move beyond monocultural and monolingual approaches and respond to learners' full linguistic and cultural repertoires (Wijayanti 2024).

The multilingual pedagogy framework provided important insights. Recent experimental evidence from Chennai confirms that translanguaging significantly enhances cognitive development in students with moderate intellectual disabilities, particularly improving listening skills when native languages serve as scaffolds (Sreelakshmi and Maheswari V 2024). Translanguaging demonstrates how learners flexibly draw on their entire repertoires, while Hornberger's continua of biliteracy highlight the interaction between oral and written, majority and minority, and formal and informal resources (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000; Vogel et al. 2019). A systematic review of translanguaging practices across learning settings demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing language anxiety, increasing student participation, and fostering a deeper understanding of subject

matter through dynamic interactions between shared languages (Moraru et al. 2025). These perspectives view linguistic diversity as a resource. When assessments favour English over the native language, the native language is often used informally, resulting in exclusion (Schwarzl and Vetter 2020; Tamim 2021). Assessment reform initiatives acknowledge the need for a shift away from monolingual testing mindsets towards multilingual assessment practices that capture students' full linguistic repertoire and favour the advancement of tests, as opposed to decontextualised scores. Furthermore, it aims to enhance the assessment of students by broadening the frame of reference for all multilingual learners, focusing on the use of comprehensive portfolios that promote linguistic and cultural sustainability (Gottlieb 2023). Recent South Asian research has confirmed that bilingual and trilingual approaches can enhance logic and engagement. However, its advantages are not uniform in areas without a focus on disabilities (Soto-Boykin et al. 2021).

India presents a particularly complex landscape. Policies such as the Right to Education Act of 2009 (GoI 2009) and the National Education Policy -2020 (GoI 2020) reaffirm commitment to inclusive schooling and multilingualism (Makwana 2022). However, entrenched hierarchies persist: English dominates as the language of aspiration, while Hindi and other regional languages are valued unevenly (Ali 2025; Fredricks and Warriner 2016; Mohanty 2010). For teachers in Kerala, this creates a triple negotiation, upholding Malayalam as the cultural base, aligning with national directives to strengthen Hindi, and preparing students for examinations in English (Chacko 2020; Felix and Kumaraswamy 2021). When students experience learning disabilities, linguistic demands intensify, requiring the teacher to make judicious decisions about language use, scaffolding, and assessments that do not reinforce stigma (Kormos 2017; Wijayanti 2024). Recent research on teacher education reveals that the challenges faced by multilingual students are not solely due to the complexities of multilingualism. These challenges also result from teachers' lack of preparedness. Teachers' beliefs about multilingualism significantly affect their classroom practices and the support they provide to multilingual students (Higgins and Ponte 2017). Translanguaging can leverage students' repertoires for equitable access (Anderson 2024; Hornberger and Link 2012); however, monolingual pedagogies and ideological constraints continue to limit its adoption (Charamba 2023; Rajendram 2023).

This study is grounded in the Inclusive Education Framework (IEF), which defines inclusion as removing barriers so that all learners can achieve presence, participation, and achievement (Ainscow 2020; Alnahdi, Lindner, and Schwab 2022; Ayaya, Makoelle, and van der Merwe 2023). The IEF shifts the focus from individual deficits toward systemic and pedagogical structures that create or remove barriers to schools' spaces, participation concerns meaningful engagement in the learning process, and achievement encompasses recognition of diverse learner progress beyond narrow academic metrics (Kuzmicheva and Afonkina 2020). In multilingual classrooms, the IEF highlights how language hierarchies and evaluative norms restrict the participation of learners with disabilities (Fredricks and Warriner 2016). Recent developments in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emphasise that multilingual contexts require assessment systems that formally recognise oral, performative, and multimodal evidence as legitimate achievements, offering multiple means of engagement and expression (Asiri, López Contreras, and Alwadei 2023). In Kerala's trilingual context, teachers' decisions, such as permitting oral responses in Malayalam, offering Hindi glosses, or scaffolding English texts, become deliberate acts of inclusion rather than marginal accommodation (Banks et al. 2022).

Based on these views, this research conceptually relates to using translanguaging and UDL to understand teachers' narratives about inclusive pedagogy in bilingual classrooms (Waitoller and Thorius 2016). Translanguaging is perceived in this context as the adaptable and agentic application of learners' total linguistic repertoires in the formation of meaning across languages, as opposed to code-switching (Tai 2022). This underlines the dynamism of multilingual teachers and students' mobilisation of linguistic resources to encourage participation and understanding (Cenoz and Gorter 2021). As an inclusive pedagogical model, UDL is used as a continuation of CAST (2018), supporting various means of engagement, representation, and expression to eliminate obstacles to

learning. The two constructs were used as interpretive data analysis tools, as teachers' reports on flexible language mediation were analyzed as translanguaging practices, and adjustments of materials, assessments, and participation were analyzed in terms of UDL principles. These frameworks provide a coding and interpretation scheme within which themes are inductively derived from participants' accounts using an interpretivist paradigm.

Despite the growth in international research, critical gaps remain in India, particularly at the intersection of inclusion and multilingual pedagogy (Iyer and Ramachandran 2019; Lightfoot et al. 2021). Most studies have addressed either teacher preparedness or bilingual strategies (Anderson 2024; Fettes and Karamouzian 2018; Morve and Maurya 2022), with little focus on how teachers integrate them into learners with disabilities (Ahsan, Nasir, and Asgher 2021; Kim, Park, and Zhao 2024). Recent meta-analytic evidence on orthographic depth and developmental dyslexia has revealed that reading deficits are moderated by orthographic complexity, with word reading accuracy showing systematic differences between dyslexic and typical readers that persist across developmental levels (Carioti et al. 2021). Psycholinguistic evidence shows that orthographic depth – English opacity, Hindi's transparency, and Malayalam's conjuncts – affects literacy acquisition (Casani, Vulchanova, and Cardinaletti 2022; Daniels and Share 2018; Ellis et al. 2004). Contemporary research on bilingual learning demonstrates that orthographic depth modulates neural networks and reading processes, with implications for how multilingual learners with dyslexia develop compensatory strategies across different writing systems (Shen and Del Tufo 2022). However, these insights rarely inform practice, leaving teachers reliant on rote remediation. Similarly, while Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes flexible access, exam-driven systems in Kerala continue to privilege speed and neatness, disadvantaging learners with disabilities (Hashey, Miller, and Foxworth 2020; Lambert et al. 2023; McKenzie, Karisa, and Kahonde 2023). Evidence indicates that integrating translanguaging, oral responses, and portfolios with UDL principles enhances participation (Qu and Cross 2024; Saunders and Wong 2023). However, without teacher-friendly models that reconcile these strategies with curricular standards, inclusion remains fragile (Vaish 2019).

This study addresses these gaps by examining how teachers in Kerala's trilingual classrooms adapt their pedagogy and assessments to support learners with disabilities. Drawing on contemporary insights into multilingual assessment equity and teacher professional learning for inclusion, this study examines how policy-practice misalignments can be addressed through systematic reforms that honour linguistic diversity while ensuring rigorous academic outcomes. Provide It asks:

RQ1: How do teachers perceive the challenges and opportunities of implementing inclusive education for students with learning disabilities in multilingual classrooms?

RQ2: How do teachers report employing translanguaging practices to support students with learning disabilities, and how do they evaluate the benefits and limitations of such practices?

RQ3: How do teachers report adapting assessment practices to accommodate learning disabilities, and what tensions do they describe between standardized and individualized needs?

RQ4: What forms of professional development and institutional support do teachers identify as being necessary for effective inclusive multilingual pedagogy?

Methodology

Study design

This study employed an interpretivist qualitative approach to explore how teachers understand and practice inclusive education in Kerala's diverse, multilingual classrooms. Grounded in the belief that meaning is shaped through social interaction and lived experiences, this perspective prioritises teachers' stories and contextual realities as the key to unlocking their insights (Creswell and Poth 2016). As the study relied exclusively on semi-structured interviews, the data represent teachers'

reported experiences and self-described practices, rather than direct classroom observations. These accounts reflect how teachers interpret and narrate their professional realities, which may not always align with enacted practice due to social desirability effects or unconscious classroom routines, such as spontaneous translanguaging. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as interpretive representations of teachers' perspectives on inclusion, rather than as observational verification of their behaviours.

Through the use of abductive reasoning, the research moved seamlessly between the developing interpretations and existing systems, such as 'presence, participation, and achievement' (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006) from the Inclusive Education Framework, translanguaging and biliteracy (García and Wei 2014), and Universal Design for Learning principles (Qu and Cross 2024). Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) has been at the heart of this study's analysis. This analysis does not consider themes to be fixed truths, but rather co-constructed interpretations made possible by reflexive engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke 2019). This approach allowed teachers' rich, nuanced perspectives to shine, prioritising depth and meaning over broad generalisations.

Participants and recruitment

The study involved 20 language-subject teachers – nine teaching English, seven teaching Malayalam, and four teaching Hindi – working in government and aided schools in Kerala's urban and rural regions. Aided schools are privately managed institutions that receive government funding, while retaining administrative autonomy. Participants aged 27–50 years had between 4 and 25 years of teaching experience, representing both early career and experienced educators. Class sizes ranged from approximately 33–50 students, reflecting the typical instructional conditions of Kerala's public school system.

All teachers reported having sustained experiences supporting multilingual learners with literacy difficulties, including students formally identified as having dyslexia or exhibiting similar reading and writing challenges. While the depth of training varied, all participants were exposed to inclusive education through departmental workshops, school-based professional learning sessions, and external capacity-building programmes. Eligibility required active classroom teaching experience and engagement with practices broadly defined as inclusive, such as differentiated instruction, remedial support, and multilingual scaffolding. In addition, all participating teachers reported having practical experience supporting multilingual learners with diagnosed or related Learning Disabilities (LD)-based literacy challenges, which informed their instructional decisions and perspectives on inclusive practices.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure variation in school type, teaching experience, class size, and geographical location (Patton 2015). School heads facilitated the dissemination of information about the study, and teachers voluntarily contacted the research team to participate, ensuring an informed and non-coercive recruitment process. Sample adequacy was guided by the principle of 'information power,' which suggests that a specific and information-rich sample is sufficient when study aims are focused and interview depth is high (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016). The study achieved diversity and analytical sufficiency through 20 in-depth interviews. Table 1 presents the profiles of the participants.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured one-to-one interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 min. The interview guide was designed to elicit teachers' understanding of inclusion, pedagogical strategies for addressing learner diversity, specific challenges of assessment in multilingual classrooms, and the institutional support or constraints they encountered. The guide was pilot tested and refined to ensure clarity, cultural resonance, and relevance to teachers' professional contexts (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015).

Table 1. Participant profile.

ID	Gender	Age	Years_Teaching	School_Type	Locale	Subject_Role	Avg_Class_Size
P01	F	32	9	Govt	Urban	English	42
P02	M	41	15	Aided	Rural	Malayalam	38
P03	F	28	6	Govt	Urban	Hindi	45
P04	F	36	12	Aided	Urban	English	40
P05	M	39	14	Govt	Rural	Malayalam	35
P06	F	30	7	Govt	Rural	Hindi	43
P07	F	45	20	Aided	Urban	English	48
P08	M	34	11	Govt	Rural	Malayalam	39
P09	F	29	5	Aided	Urban	English	33
P10	M	50	25	Govt	Rural	Malayalam	50
P11	F	27	4	Govt	Urban	Hindi	36
P12	F	38	13	Aided	Urban	English	41
P13	M	35	10	Govt	Rural	Malayalam	44
P14	F	31	8	Govt	Urban	English	40
P15	M	43	18	Aided	Urban	English	46
P16	F	33	9	Aided	Rural	Hindi	38
P17	M	37	11	Govt	Urban	Malayalam	47
P18	F	40	16	Govt	Rural	English	42
P19	F	29	5	Aided	Urban	Hindi	37
P20	M	46	21	Govt	Rural	Malayalam	49

Note: This table summarises the profiles of 20 teachers (12 female, eight male) aged 27–50 with 4–25 years of teaching experience. Participants were from government ($n = 13$) and aided ($n = 7$) schools, evenly split between urban and rural settings. Subject roles included English ($n = 9$), Malayalam ($n = 7$), and Hindi ($n = 4$), with class sizes ranging from 33 to 50 students.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language – English, Malayalam, Hindi, or a combination – allowing natural code-switching and translanguaging. All sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and the researcher took field notes on the classroom context and provided immediate reflections after each interview. Transcription was performed verbatim. For non-English interviews, transcription was followed by translation into English. To ensure accuracy, translations were prepared by bilingual assistants and checked by a second bilingual reviewer. This dual process preserves semantic nuances and pedagogical terminology, prioritising meaning equivalence rather than literal rendering (Temple and Young 2004). Teachers who shared anonymized classroom artifacts, such as adapted worksheets or excerpted rubrics, were used to triangulate the accounts but were not treated as independent data. Ethical standards, including secure data storage and anonymization of all personal identifiers, were meticulously upheld throughout data collection to protect participant confidentiality and promote the trustworthiness of the findings.

Data analysis

All interviews were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: immersion, coding and constructing candidate themes, evaluation of themes against the dataset, definition and naming of themes, and synthesis of an analytic narrative (Braun and Clarke 2019). Coding was carried out on both semantic and latent levels using NVivo software to aid in managing the dataset and creating memo trials. The analysis employed inductive and reflective approaches, adhering to the interpretivist paradigm. Therefore, the themes were generated through iterative and interpretative engagement with the participants' narrated experiences, rather than being imposed by prior hypotheses. Theoretical frameworks – primarily the Inclusive Education Framework and translanguaging theory – serve as sensitising concepts to inform subsequent interpretive stages, without limiting data-driven understanding. Thematic robustness was assessed in terms of internal coherence, theoretical resonance, and explanatory power in relation to the research questions posed, rather than by frequency counts.

The participation of a multilingual research team reinforced the procedure. Memorising one's positionality, emerging understanding, and possible biases continued throughout the analytic process (Finlay 2002). Critical-friend discussions occur at critical junctures, allowing team members to challenge each other's interpretations and search for multiple plausible readings (Smith and McGannon 2018). Inter-rater reliability statistics were intentionally excluded because they were epistemologically incongruent with reflexive thematic analysis and interpretivist assumptions underpinning this research. Instead, reflexivity, transparency, and iterative engagement with data support the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Marian College Institutional Review Board of Kerala (Application No: MCKA/IERB/0825-01) prior to data collection. The participants received clear information about the study and provided written consent for their voluntary participation, as well as for audio recording, transcription, and the use of anonymized quotations. Confidentiality was ensured by removing identifiable details and assigning pseudonyms to individuals. Data were securely stored with restricted access and will be destroyed five years after publication, in accordance with best ethical practices to protect participants' privacy and rights.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

The rigour of the study was ensured by adopting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged language-congruent interviews, thick descriptions, triangulation with artifacts and field notes, and targeted member verification of selected quotations. Dependability was supported by an audit trial comprising interview protocols, transcription logs, coding decisions, and analytic memos, enabling transparency and external scrutiny. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, which documented how the researchers' experiences and orientations – particularly their backgrounds in teacher education and positive stances towards multilingual pedagogies – shaped interpretation, and how such influences were critically examined (Berger 2015). Detailed contextual information about schools, participants, and classroom ecologies addressed transferability, enabling readers to make reasoned judgments regarding the findings' applicability to other multilingual educational contexts.

Results

Thematic overview

The analysis generated five interrelated themes describing how Kerala teachers understand and enact inclusive education within everyday classroom constraints: Table 2 provides a thematic overview that summarises each theme's focus and the core practices and tensions it captures: (1) teachers' understanding of inclusive education, (2) challenges in implementing inclusive education, (3) challenges in multilingual inclusive classrooms, (4) institutional and policy support, and (5) teachers' reflections and future directions. These themes were developed through a reflective thematic analysis and are illustrated in the sections that follow, where the selected participant extracts (P1–P20) are integrated into the interpretive narrative. To ensure alignment with the research questions, each theme corresponds to a specific analytical focus. Theme 1 addresses RQ1 by examining teachers' conceptualisation of inclusion, while Theme 2 highlights systemic and institutional challenges related to RQ1 and RQ2. Theme 2 responded to RQ2 and RQ3 by illustrating how teachers report using multilingual and translingual practices and navigating assessment demands. Theme 4 further informs RQ4 by emphasising policy and school-level support needs, and Theme 5

Table 2. Thematic summary of teachers' perspectives on inclusive education in multilingual classrooms.

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative teacher voices	Inclusive Education Framework (IEF) dimension
Teachers' understanding of inclusive education	• Inclusion as dignity and belonging; • Avoidance of labelling; • Balancing pace for diverse learners; Multilingual adaptation as inclusion	*'Inclusion is not just keeping the child in the class but making them feel they can achieve'. (P03)* *'I often slow down for weaker learners while making sure the brighter ones don't feel left out'. (P01)*	Presence & participation
Challenges in implementing inclusive education	• Overcrowded classrooms and curriculum pressure; • Inadequate training and resources; • Parental resistance and peer stigma; • Teacher emotional burden	*'It is impossible to pay attention to each child with 40+ students'. (P01)* *'Parents want the child to get more marks and dismiss inclusion as a waste of time'. (P02)*	Presence & participation
Challenges in multilingual inclusive classrooms	• Pacing vs individual needs; • Oral vs written performance gaps; • Limited home exposure to second/third languages; • Exam culture privileging neatness/speed	*'They understand the story in Malayalam, but when asked to write in English, spelling swallows their energy'. (P01)* *'My students can narrate in Malayalam but stumble with written English'. (P10)*	Participation & achievement
Institutional and policy support	• Supportive but inconsistent school leadership; • Policy-practice misalignment in assessment; • Scarcity of inclusive teaching resources; • Fragmented training systems	*'My HM allows oral answers, but exams still demand neat paragraphs'. (P10)* *'Samagra talks philosophy, but I need Malayalam-focused ideas for long words'. (P02, P06)*	Participation & achievement
Teachers' reflections and future directions	• Oral and performative strategies (voice notes, choral reading, drama); • Cultural and multilingual practices as bridges; • Small victories are transformative. • Advocacy for alternative assessments	*'When I allowed voice notes, students saw their ideas on paper – it changed how they saw themselves'. (P01)* *'With buddy reading, even the weakest student tried one line'. (P02)*	Participation & achievement

Note: Table 2 summarises five themes from teacher narratives, highlighting their conceptions of inclusion, challenges in practice, and adaptive strategies in multilingual classrooms. Subthemes reflect systemic barriers and enabling practices, with quotations illustrating lived realities. Each theme is mapped to the Inclusive Education Framework (IEF) dimensions of presence, participation, and achievement.

elaborates RQ3 and RQ4 through teachers' reflections on assessment, learner progression, and future directions for inclusive multilingual practice. Together, these themes offer a coherent response to all four research questions.

Theme 1: teachers' understanding of inclusive education

Teachers reported conceptualising inclusion not as a discrete programme but as an everyday ethic that organises classroom pace, language, and relationships. Their accounts frame inclusion as a matter of dignity, ensuring that children are seen, protected from stigma, and offered legitimate opportunities to participate, while recognising Kerala's broader social justice commitments. Rather than limiting inclusion to disability placement, participants extended it to linguistic, economic, and emotional differences. They describe a moral stance expressed through small but consequential decisions: slowing down without singling out, validating multiple pathways to understanding, and refusing to compare with cultures that fracture confidence.

Several teachers have explained that inclusion balances learning opportunities for both slow and advanced learners within the same classroom or learning space. As one teacher explained,

> I often slow down for weaker learners while ensuring the brighter ones do not feel left out. It's a struggle to balance, but I feel that is what being inclusive means – making everyone feel they belong. (P1)

Here, inclusion was reported as an ethical balancing act that requires teachers to negotiate competing needs constantly. Other teachers linked inclusion directly to Kerala's sociocultural context, in which parental expectations of academic success remain high. One teacher observed,

> In Kerala, parents expect academic success, so I must reassure them that slower learners can still progress. It's not just about special needs – it's also about language, culture, and even economic differences among students. (P2)

Such reflections illustrate how teachers perceive themselves as mediators between societal pressure and children's individual learning capacities. Teachers also acknowledged that their attitudes significantly shaped classroom culture. As one participant reflected,

> If I don't treat them equally, the other students will also copy me. So, I consciously use small strategies like group work to make everyone feel part of the class. (P3)

This indicates that teachers' awareness is not merely technical but relational, grounded in modelling respectful behaviour. Linguistic diversity has emerged as a recurring dimension of inclusion. With an increasing number of migrant families in Kerala, teachers have reported adapting their language practices to accommodate these families.

> I have students from migrant families in my Malayalam class, and sometimes they don't understand well. I try to bring them in by mixing English or Hindi. It takes extra effort, but I feel responsible for their learning. (P4)

Such accounts suggest that multilingual pedagogy is viewed as central to sustaining equitable participation. Socioeconomic inequalities were identified as barriers to inclusion in the study. Once the teacher remarked,

> Some children come from impoverished households, and their performance is affected by that. I make sure not to label them as weak, because once we teachers start labelling, children lose confidence. (P5)

This highlights the teachers' awareness that exclusion can occur through subtle discursive and structural practices. For many participants, inclusion was described as part of Kerala's educational legacy rooted in the state's literacy movement.

> I feel Kerala has advanced in literacy because we never left children behind. Even now, I try to carry that spirit by giving extra attention to children who feel invisible in class. (P6)

Teachers' reflections also indicated that inclusion beyond disability encompassed shyness, disinterest, or stigma towards specific subjects. As one English teacher observed,

> I see students shy to speak. I give them small roles so they gain courage, and I think that too is inclusion. (P7)

Similarly, a Hindi teacher explained,

> In Hindi class, many students think the subject is useless. I try to motivate them by connecting lessons with daily life. (P8)

These perspectives suggest that inclusion is interpreted not merely as accommodation but also as motivation. Pedagogical flexibility is the key strategy. Teachers described mixing teaching methods to address the different learning styles. '*Some children understand by listening, some by writing, and some by activities. I try to mix methods so nobody feels left out' (P9).*

Another teacher echoed this by saying,

> In a crowded classroom sometimes, I think, if I only go by the textbook, half the class will be lost. Therefore, I adapt, give local examples, and even cite stories from students' lives. (P12)

The inclusion process is portrayed as adaptive, evolving, and committed to equality and dignity. Several teachers have reflected on how discouraging words could harm students' self-worth.

> Sometimes we don't realize how much our words affect children. If I say 'you cannot do this,' they carry that stigma. (P11)

Another teacher emphasised the link between inclusion and Kerala's ethos of social justice:

> I ensure that no child is mocked or isolated, even through small jokes. (P15)

Generally, teachers view inclusion as a method of moral responsibility. Through small and intentional practices, they focused on avoiding comparative behaviours. Providing students with quiet support, fostering peer-to-peer collaboration, and collectively setting the tone for a sense of belonging. Another teacher concluded the following.

> In real life, they will meet people who are differently abled, speak different languages, and come from varied backgrounds. When schoolchildren are taught to accept and support each other, they grow into responsible citizens. (P20)

Educational activities organised in inclusive approaches can provide children with opportunities to share experiences, develop empathy, and model behaviours from the world outside their families. Teachers view themselves as frontline agents of social justice as they negotiate academic expectations, linguistic diversity, and socioeconomic inequalities. However, their stories reveal the difficulties of large classes and inadequate resources, which indicates that inclusion remains a product of individual efforts, especially from the teacher.

Theme 2: challenges in implementing inclusive education

Most teachers reported aligning with the principles of inclusion; however, they also described considerable challenges that hindered their implementation of these principles. These challenges included limited resources, sociocultural constraints, and emotional pressure to sustain inclusion.

Several teachers reported managing large class sizes, often with 40 students or more, which made implementing differentiated attention difficult. As P1 stated,

> It is impossible to pay attention to each and every child with special needs in a classroom of 40 or more students, which causes professional frustration and feelings of guilt.

Although participants described class sizes of around 40–42 students as challenging, such numbers are typical in many parts of India, where class sizes can exceed 70 in some urban regions, further increasing the difficulty of providing individualised support.

According to P6 and P16, syllabus completion is a concern. Moreover, teachers must prepare students for examinations. Due to this, teachers '*have to quickly finish the entire syllabus,*' forcing them to limit accommodation and innovation. These systemic demands highlighted what P20 calls a '*contradiction between policy talk and classroom realities,*' where teachers must '*perform miracles*'.

Teachers frequently reported inadequate professional preparation and resources. P3 observed that teachers were not sufficiently trained. They explained that whenever '*there is a run-of-the-mill workshop*,' they leave with '*not much being said on what to do*'. Similarly, P5 noted a lack of teaching aids, the absence of specialised personnel, and the realisation that she had to '*buy small materials with my money*'. These narratives highlight the disparity between the discussion of inclusion and the actual resourcing of school realities.

Sociocultural factors also emerged as significant impediments. Parents often opposed inclusive education because they wanted it to focus on student performance and achievement. P2 explained that '*parents want the child to get more marks*' and usually dismiss inclusion as '*a waste of time*'. At the same time, P14 described the stigma of parents who objected to their children sitting alongside their differently abled peers. When teachers hold such views, they question their commitment to inclusion and their legitimacy. In addition, P9 drew attention to peer dynamics, where some students '*laugh when a slow learner makes a mistake*,' reflecting how broader social prejudices enter the classroom and complicate teachers' efforts to foster empathy.

Teachers also reported difficulties in dealing with linguistic diversity (P4), behavioural problems (P7), and a uniform assessment system that remains rigid in design. P8's frustration was evident when he said that '*the education system is still set up to make all learners do the same in exams*,' highlighting a clear contradiction between inclusionary pedagogies and exclusionary assessments. It was also found that inconsistencies across subjects (P19) and the lack of collaboration among teachers (P13) fragmented inclusive practices, creating unequal experiences for learners.

For many teachers, inclusion comes at an emotional cost. P11 admitted feeling '*drained*' and said it required considerable patience. P17 finds it hard to remain impartial when other students think they are favoured. These reflections suggest that inclusion constitutes an affective form of labour performed by individual teachers, often without institutional recognition or structural support.

Together, these accounts indicate that inclusion operates within a context in which the structural, cultural, and institutional constraints are deeply embedded. The findings highlight the tension between inclusion-promoting policies and classroom realities marked by overcrowding, rigid curricula, limited training, and social resistance. It is noteworthy that the teachers' voices reveal that these are interlocking rather than isolated constraints that reinforce each other. In this sense, practitioners experience less inclusion as a coherent practice and more as a contested negotiation in an unsupportive context. These findings represent teachers' self-reported perceptions of challenges rather than observed classroom practices.

Theme 3: challenges in multilingual inclusive classrooms

This theme examines how teachers report that multilinguality intensifies the everyday challenges of inclusion. Teachers described a mismatch between what their learners need, namely a slower pace, oral rehearsal, engaging in code-switching, and incremental written goals, and what the system rewards: rapid completion of the syllabus, uniform written outputs, and exam-ready neatness. Teachers explained that students often spoke well in classes with mixed languages, including Malayalam, English, Hindi, and their border varieties; however, teachers noted that although many students demonstrated clear oral understanding during discussion, their written work, particularly in English and Hindi, tended to be limited or inconsistent. They explained that this was mainly due to the large size of the classrooms and irregular attendance. Furthermore, teachers noted that students were exposed to second or third languages for a limited time at home, which they believed caused a loss of confidence in the lessons. Teachers perceived themselves as working within an exam-driven education system, describing a delicate tightrope between learners' needs and systemic demands. To keep hesitant readers and writers engaged, teachers reported learning heavily on micro-routines, while curricular timelines, assessment norms, and parental expectations kept pulling them back toward speed and standardisation.

Teachers described experiencing complex narratives of inclusive education, which were enhanced by classrooms with diverse languages and cultures. The problem lies in the constant tension between the leisurely pace of the curriculum and the needs of learners. Teachers often spoke about the 'portion race' and the pressure to finish the lesson within fixed timelines, even when several students were at the basic level.

As P1 explained,

> I am consistently investing in portions and slow readers are stiffened. When we converse in Malayalam, they comprehend the story, but when I ask them to write in English, spelling and punctuation drain them out. I tried to sit next to them, but with more than forty in the room, they pull me away every two minutes. (P1)

Similarly, P2 raised concerns about leaving people behind:

> Remediation gets pushed to tomorrow, and tomorrow never comes.

This reflected a tendency in the system to focus solely on syllabus coverage, abandoning those who required sustained support – a pattern that teachers viewed as contradicting inclusionist values.

Teachers reported a noticeable gap between oral proficiency and writing performance as learners transitioned from one language to another. Many observed that children who could think and talk freely in Malayalam struggled with written English or Hindi. As P10 reflected,

> My students, once given a pencil, tend to lose their voice. Spelling is the gatekeeper to marks, while comprehension is ignored.

Similarly, P5 expressed concern for the students who '*think brilliantly aloud and then hand me three broken lines,*' showing that strong oral comprehension does not automatically translate into written fluency. Teachers explained that written examinations often emphasise handwriting speed, accuracy, and neatness, which can overshadow meaningful learning and incremental writing progress. According to the participants, these expectations often overshadow students' demonstrated oral comprehension and incremental written progress. As P14 described, system privileges are characterised as '*rapid, written form over slower, more thoughtful work*,' which they felt marginalised students who required more time or relied on expression to demonstrate understanding.

Teachers also reported difficulties with language as a barrier to learning second and third languages, particularly in Hindi. They explained that limited home exposure and practice hinder literacy development. As per P3 remarked,

> Practice is the wall we hit again and again. It gets lost overnight.

P6 reinforced this point,

> Hindi needs a little bit on a daily basis, but our timetables prefer a big examination at a later stage. For the migrant and border students, other layers of difficulty were added.

P15 noted that students often transferred Malayalam or home language patterns into Hindi, which was misinterpreted as 'carelessness'. P11 added that bridging across languages was particularly difficult for students whose home languages were those of migrant children, who did not easily bridge into Malayalam, reinforcing that teachers navigated a multilingual environment beyond policy assumptions.

Another common challenge teachers described was officials' failure to acknowledge or credit genuine progress. Teachers explained that incremental improvements, such as gains in oral fluency or the ability to produce a few clear written lines, rarely received marks or recognition. P9, for instance, remarked that

> The child improves, the paper doesn't show it. Ignoring always invisibility is restricting everyone.

Likewise, P20 compared classroom celebrations with formal assessment demands:

> We celebrate two writings whenever the report card asks for pages.

This illustrates how a performance-oriented system discourages gradual learning and undermines teacher motivation. Parents also often contribute to this pressure by demanding polished written products rather than valuing the process of incremental growth. P19 observed,

> Parents want polished writing quickly, but my kids need time to think and speak first.

Teachers have also highlighted the emotional and managerial burden of sustaining inclusivity in large mixed-ability classrooms. P18 describes the practical realities.

> My fifty student classes are always centered on. Those that require the most time get frustrated while those with on it get defensive.

P16 shared the strain of constant code-switching:

> Parents say 'only English,' students beg 'please explain in Malayalam.' I code-switch all period and still worry I failed someone.

Such narratives revealed how teachers continuously negotiated competing demands, parental expectations, student needs, and curriculum mandates, while carrying the emotional weight of those left behind. As P7 admitted,

> By term-end I know who I left behind and it stays with me.

These self-reported accounts show that multilingual inclusive classrooms are not only linguistically complex but also structurally misaligned with the ideals of inclusive education. Teachers expressed an acute awareness of their students' strengths, particularly in oral and collaborative modes; however, systemic demands for written speed, uniform pacing, and high-stakes testing obstructed their ability to respond. The participants' voices clarified that inclusion in multilingual contexts is less about goodwill and more about daily compromises, where teachers constantly '*row against the current to keep these children visible*' (P20) to uphold the promise of inclusive education.

Theme 4: institutional and policy support

Many teachers have emphasised the importance of institutional backing and policy frameworks in shaping the everyday realities of inclusive education. While most respondents confirmed receiving support from their principals/headmistresses (HM) and colleagues, they felt that the system structures, including training modules from the State Council Educational Research Training (SCERT), examination policies, and school-level resource allocation, were not sufficiently aligned with the philosophy of inclusion. Their accounts illustrate a persistent gap between *policy rhetoric* and classroom realities, where children continue to be penalised for handwriting, writing speed, and text size despite broader discourses promoting equitable participation.

Several participants reported that immediate school-level support was encouraging, but insufficient in the absence of systemic follow-through. As P1 remarked,

> My HM allows me to shorten tasks and accept oral answers, and the resource teacher drops by once a month. SCERT/Samagra trainings sound good, but they stay broad – I need English-specific Learning Disability (LD) tools and decodable readers.

This sense of partial but inadequate institutional scaffolding was echoed by P2, who praised a supportive culture but lamented the absence of a protected time for remedial work.

> School culture is supportive – no one questions buddy reading or audio submissions. However, workshops often feel generic; I need Malayalam-focused ideas for long words and collaborative writing. Assessment hasn't caught up – essay-heavy tests still dominate. If the department protected one remedial period weekly, inclusion would stop feeling like extra work.

Similarly, P16 stressed the need for structural backing that makes inclusive practices sustainable rather than optional.

> HM supports flexible timelines, but class size makes conferencing rare … A weekly remedial block on the timetable would change outcomes.

The teachers also described the mismatch between progressive and rigid inclusion policies. Despite these policy endorsements, oral checks, portfolios, and alternative outputs remain unofficial and undervalued. P3 succinctly captured this contradiction.

> Policy mentions accommodations, yet oral checks do not count in marks, so progress stays invisible.

P10 added that, while schools may allow some flexibility, standard examinations often negate these efforts:

> School lets me scribe and accept audio first, but common exams still demand neat paragraphs.

This recurring dissonance leaves teachers in the position of translating aspirational policies into practice with little institutional or formal legitimacy.

The lack of relevant teaching resources has been reported to create a significant systemic gap. Participants frequently emphasised that *SCERT* or *Samagra* training, although philosophically aligned with inclusion, failed to provide practical, language-specific tools. As P6 pointed out,

> Samagra talks philosophy; day-to-day Hindi methods for children with learning difficulties are thin. I want a state-approved matra progression and graded practice sheets.

P15, teaching in a border area, added that multilingual transfer issues remained neglected.

> Border schools need Malayalam-Kannada-Hindi transfer guides; I am improvising those bridges. Trainings mention inclusion, not tri-lingual transfer.

Consequently, teachers reported resorting to improvising, often with their own materials, which burdened them and generated inconsistency across classrooms. Material scarcity and budgetary constraints are frequently mentioned as compounding these challenges. Teachers repeatedly emphasised that the absence of simple aids, such as reading rulers, large-print texts, and graded readers, undermined inclusive teaching. P5 noted,

> My HM supports adaptations, but basic aids – reading rulers, large-print sets – are scarce.

Similarly, P20 stressed that modest resource allocation could transform practice:

> A tiny annual budget for charts and word rings would transform practice. When policy, exams, and school messaging align, inclusion will feel normal, not extra.

Multiple responses echoed this call for small but targeted funding, suggesting that resource deficits, rather than a lack of will, remain a key bottleneck.

Another recurrent strand that teachers identified was the limited effectiveness of parental engagement in the absence of institutional legitimacy. Teachers reported that parent workshops and meetings worked only when linked to concrete demonstrations and state-approved frameworks. As P12 put it,

> Oral checks and small dictations don't show up on report cards, so parents dismiss them. A state-endorsed oral-fluency scale would legitimise what we do.

P14 reinforced this by noting that families responded better to practical, accessible demonstrations than to abstract theory:

> Parent sessions are irregular and theory-heavy – families want to see how to do shared reading. A short Malayalam video toolkit would solve half the problem.

Overall, these accounts underscore teachers' perceptions that institutional and policy-level support for inclusive education remains fragmented. While school leadership often demonstrated goodwill, systemic reinforcement through formalised assessment reforms, targeted resource allocation, and practical training was reported as limited. Teachers consistently argued that inclusion remains precarious and driven by individual commitment rather than structural stability until examinations, policy guidelines, and appraisal mechanisms converge to value oral, multimodal, and incremental progress.

Theme 5: teachers' reflections and future directions

Teachers' reflections generally indicated both the promise of creative strategies and the urgent need for the systemic recognition of alternative literacies. Their accounts showed how oral, performative, and multimodal practices were reported as lifelines for children otherwise marginalised by rigid, text-dominated frameworks while simultaneously highlighting the structural limitations of assessment systems that fail to accommodate these gains.

Several teachers have described how oral strategies have opened up new avenues of entry into literacy. P1 explained,

> When I allowed children to record their responses as voice notes and transcribe them, they were shocked to see their own ideas on paper. It changed how they saw themselves.

P2 similarly reflected,

> With buddy reading, even the weakest student tried to read one line. That line gave them confidence for the next day.

P3 noted that '*choral reading helped a child who never spoke begin to join the group. Slowly, she tried writing one word*'. P13 confirms this trajectory by adding

> Through podcasts and recordings, students could hear themselves. They started believing they were competent.

These accounts illustrate teachers' perceptions of the transformative role of oral scaffolding in enabling reluctant learners to bridge the gap between silence and active participation. Other teachers have stressed the role of drama, storytelling, and culturally rooted practices in fostering inclusion. P4 remarked,

> Reader's theatre made my quietest children stand up and perform. Later, they wrote small paragraphs based on their roles.

P11 explained how cultural texts became catalysts:

> When I used local folktales, migrant children told their stories in their own words before attempting writing.

P16 reflected,

> In drama skits, those who always avoided writing suddenly performed enthusiastically. Later, they wrote small scripts themselves.

P15 spoke of the importance of language bridges.

> For children on the border, mapping Hindi and Malayalam sounds helped them to attempt words. However, we need proper guides to support this.

Together, these voices demonstrate teachers' belief that performative and culturally sustaining practices offer participation and pathways to written literacy.

Reflections also revealed teachers' frustration with assessment systems that did not recognise these diverse achievements. P6 noted,

> Some children who shine in oral tasks remain invisible in exams. Their real talents are never recorded.

P7 described her strategy as follows:

> I used sentence starters like 'I think … ' and 'In my view … ' so that silent learners could speak. However, they cannot use these strategies in exams, so their progress goes unrecognised.

P8 added,

> When children made photo stories, they explained them so well orally. However, there is no rubric to grade this.

P19, who reported experimenting with technology, explained.

> Voice-to-text helped one student finally write sentences. However, the school does not have devices for all.

P18 strongly argued for alternative evaluation:

> I believe portfolios show growth better than exams. It captures their small steps.

Similarly, P9 observed,

> If oral fluency scales were part of the evaluation, we could show their progress more clearly.

P12 echoed this sentiment,

> Oral and written should be balanced. Otherwise, inclusive work is invisible.

These reflections foreground teachers' advocacy for systemic reforms that validate oral and multimodal forms of achievement.

The emotional weight of the successes was articulated powerfully. P5 recalled,

> One slow learner wrote two lines after oral practice. For me, those two lines were more valuable than any exam paper.

P10 described the power of co-scribing:

> When I wrote their words on the board, children saw their own sentences. They felt proud to be authors.

P17 narrated,

> A boy who never wrote finally produced two sentences after drawing and storytelling. For us, that was a big deal.

P20 highlighted incremental growth:

> Children started by captioning pictures. Slowly they moved to small paragraphs. Each step built their confidence.

These statements emphasise that teachers perceive inclusive pedagogy as being about skill transmission and sustaining dignity, hope, and motivation in learners who are otherwise left behind.

The teachers' reflections indicated that inclusive education, as they experienced and described it, is sustained by goodwill and strategic innovations that honour diverse learner pathways. Oral, performative, and multimodal practices were seen as providing tangible breakthroughs; however, their legitimacy was perceived as being undercut by rigid assessment frameworks and inadequate institutional support. The responses also underscored teachers' recognition of the symbolic power of '*small victories*' in children's learning journeys, moments that teachers considered disproportionately meaningful compared to formal exam results.

In this sense, the future of inclusive education, as imagined and reported by these practitioners, lies in expanding the systemic recognition of diverse literacies and embedding portfolios, oral assessments, and multimodal outputs as integral parts of schooling, rather than supplementary add-ons. Table 2 presents a thematic summary of the teachers' perspectives on inclusive education.

Discussion

This study examined how teachers in Kerala's trilingual classrooms understand and enact inclusive education, highlighting the ethical commitments that sustain inclusion, and the structural, linguistic, and institutional barriers that constrain it. Analyzed through the Inclusive Education Framework (IEF) lens, teachers' voices show how the dimensions of presence, participation, and achievement are negotiated in conditions marked by large class sizes, exam-driven curricula, parental expectations, and language hierarchies. Their narratives confirm that inclusion is not merely about placement but requires everyday pedagogical acts – such as slowing down, code-switching, and legitimising multiple pathways – which transform the classroom into a space of belonging (Ainscow & Ainscow 2020; Graham et al. 2018). At the same time, their accounts reveal the fragility of these acts when not institutionally recognised.

Teachers' conceptualizations of inclusion (Theme 1) align closely with disability studies' framing of inclusion as a social justice project rather than a set of technical accommodations (Ainscow 2020; Fettes and Karamouzian 2018). Participants consistently described inclusion as an ethics of dignity and belonging, extending beyond disability to encompass linguistic, socioeconomic, and emotional differences. This confirms prior work emphasising that inclusive education depends on teachers'

attitudes and relational practices (Lightfoot et al. 2021; Mouboua, Atobatele, and Akintayo 2024). Teachers' resistance to labelling and their insistence on modelling respect resonate with the argument that systemic deficit views, not individual impairments, create exclusion (Graham et al. 2018). These perspectives posit that teachers are moral agents who construct inclusive school cultures.

However, structural and cultural barriers (Theme 2) reveal how systemic contradictions undermine these commitments. Teachers pointed to high pupil-to-teacher ratios, curriculum pacing pressures, and a lack of resources as major impediments, echoing concerns that policy talk often diverges from classroom realities (Pradhan and Naik 2024). Participants described workshops as generic and insufficiently disability- or language-specific, leaving them 'at a loss for strategy' (Anderson 2024). Teachers also emphasised the emotional burden of inclusion, noting feelings of guilt, exhaustion, and perceived unfairness, underscoring that inclusion remains disproportionately dependent on individual labour, without systemic scaffolding. This aligns with the literature, noting that exclusion is embedded in broader sociocultural discourse beyond classrooms (Iyer and Ramachandran 2019).

The results also show that multilinguality complicates inclusion (theme 3). Teachers explained how children spoke Malayalam more fluently than they wrote in English or Hindi. Teachers further observed that assessment systems emphasise handwriting accuracy, speed, and spelling, often overshadowing students' conceptual understandings. This mismatch between oral and written performance has implications for orthographic depth. The problems of dyslexia and similar issues arise from English being opaque, Hindi being comparatively transparent, and the orthographic complexity of Malayalam, particularly its conjunct consonants, which require considerable visual-phonological processing during literacy acquisition (Casani, Vulchanova, and Cardinaletti 2022; Daniels and Share 2018; Ellis et al. 2004). Teachers' reliance on oral rehearsal, buddy reading, and code-switching illustrates the potential of translanguaging and biliteracy frameworks (Hornberger and Link 2012; Vogel et al. 2019). However, the lack of systemic recognition, in which 'two clean lines' of text are invisible in report cards, reveals how assessment structures negate inclusive gains. This aligns with evidence that translanguaging can enhance engagement but remains constrained by monolingual ideologies and exam cultures (Charamba 2023; Rajendram 2023).

Institutional and policy support (Theme 4) has emerged as partial and fragmented. Teachers acknowledged school-level goodwill; however, systemic reinforcement through assessments, training, and resources has been inconsistent. The dissonance between progressive policy rhetoric and rigid exam practices echoes critiques that Indian education policy promotes multilingualism and inclusion rhetorically while leaving the assessment unchanged (Ali 2025; Fredricks and Warriner 2016). Teachers' demands for protected remedial time, state-approved script progressions, and modest resource allocations confirm that inclusion requires not only teacher initiative, but also structural embedding. Without such recognition, inclusion remains a discretionary practice rather than a normalised expectation (Vaish 2019).

Finally, teachers' reflections and future directions (Theme 5) highlight how oral, performative, and multimodal practices create meaningful breakthroughs for marginalised learners. Voice notes, choral reading, readers' theatre, and cultural storytelling enabled hesitant learners to transition from silence to participation, illustrating UDL's principle of multiple means of engagement and expression (Hashey, Miller, and Foxworth 2020; Lambert et al. 2023; Qu and Cross 2024). Teachers' emotional investment in 'small victories,' two emerging lines of writing, or a learner's first oral response, underscores the symbolic power of incremental growth. However, the systemic invisibility of these gains in official assessments reveals the urgent need to embed oral fluency scales, portfolios, and multimodal rubrics in formal evaluation (Saunders and Wong 2023). Teachers' advocacy for such reforms positions them not only as practitioners but also as policy-relevant knowledge holders who articulate what inclusion must be sustainable.

These findings extend international debates on inclusive multilingual education by demonstrating how inclusion is simultaneously enacted and obstructed at the intersection of disability, language hierarchy, and assessment regimes. They demonstrate that Kerala's teachers embody

the spirit of IEF by removing barriers through their everyday decisions; however, systemic recognition lags behind. Theoretically, this study integrates IEF, translanguaging, biliteracy, UDL, and orthographic depth to explain why oral progress remains invisible in monolingual assessment systems that prioritise rapid written production and timed handwriting. Practically, it highlights three priorities: (i) reforming assessment to legitimize oral and multimodal outputs, (ii) providing script-sensitive resources and protected remedial time, and (iii) institutionalising practice-proximal professional development that bridges policy and classroom realities.

Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretical implications

This study synthesises the Inclusive Education Framework (IEF) together with translanguaging, biliteracy continua, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and orthographic depth theories to contribute to the theory of inclusive multilingual education. Previous studies have independently examined each of these frameworks. In contrast, this study combines the two frameworks to demonstrate how teachers enact inclusion through their everyday classroom decisions, such as varying the pace of instruction, legitimising oral responses, scaffolding across multiple scripts, and implementing non-isolated interventions. These practices concretely embody IEF's core dimensions of presence, participation, and achievement (Ainscow 2020). Notably, the findings reveal that despite teachers' adaptive strategies, inclusion remains precarious when systemic assessment regimes prioritise monolingual written fluency and rapid production, thus perpetuating educational exclusion (Fredricks and Warriner 2016). This study addresses the critical gap between pedagogical ideals and institutional realities using a novel theoretical lens.

In addition, this study refines previous research on translanguaging and biliteracy by evaluating the role of script-specific orthographic features, specifically English's deep opacity, Hindi's relative transparency, and complex conjuncts of Malayalam, in creating a persistent oral–written gap for learners with disabilities (Casani, Vulchanova, and Cardinaletti 2022; Daniels and Share 2018; Ellis et al. 2004). Such insight continues to undermine current translanguaging models, which primarily focus on flexibility in the lexicon and embedded complexity in orthography as essential mediators of literacy uptake. The principles of UDL have also been applied to trilingual contexts. Truly inclusive pedagogies cannot rely solely on assessment frameworks that validate only linguistic forms; they must also encompass non-written forms of expression, including oral and performative modes (Lambert et al. 2023). In other words, the combined results of these contributions affect the interpretation of inclusive education. Furthermore, it moves away from being merely a teaching issue to one of the system-level designs. Notably, it brings assessment to the forefront as a critical site that either enables or constrains learners' participation. This study contributes to this theory by examining the dynamic interaction of salient linguistic, cognitive, and institutional factors in the multilingual classroom that affect inclusion.

Practical implications

Policy alignment and assessment reform: The most urgent implication is the alignment of inclusive and multilingual policies with assessment standards. Although frameworks such as the Right to Education Act (2009) (GoI 2009) and the National Education Policy (2020) (GoI 2020) emphasise inclusion and multilingualism, teachers' accounts highlight how standard examinations continue to reward handwriting, neatness, and speed (Ali 2025). Policy bodies such as SCERT and examination boards should mandate:

- Oral fluency scales for Malayalam, Hindi, and English were embedded in the term evaluation.

- Script-sensitive rubrics separate conceptual quality from transcription demand, ensuring that orthographic challenges do not mask learner competence.
- Portfolio-based assessment incorporating audio recordings, annotated drafts, co-scribed texts, and performance artifacts.

Embedding these reforms would convert the 'invisible progress' teachers described into recognised achievement, thereby operationalising IEF's achievement dimension.

Teacher training and professional development

Professional development must be practice-proximal. Teachers consistently reported that the existing workshops were generic and lacked language- and disability-specific strategies. Training should, therefore, focus on the following:

- Screening and classroom-level supports for common learning difficulties.
- Structured translanguaging routines (oral rehearsal, paired dictation, co-scribing, and independent writing).
- UDL-consistent assessment design with ready-to-use rubrics for oral explanations, multimodal outputs, and performance-based tasks such as the reader's theatre.
- Parent communication toolkits (videos and guides in Malayalam, Hindi, and English) supported home-based reinforcement.

Such training should combine classroom demonstrations, collaborative lesson studies, and portfolio moderation to ensure that new knowledge translates directly into assessable student work (Anderson 2024; Banks et al. 2022).

Systemic resourcing and timetabling

Teachers' reflections highlight the need for modest yet critical resources, including a protected weekly remedial block within timetables, micro-budgets for decodable readers, reading rulers, and large-print materials, as well as access to low-cost voice-to-text technologies to support co-scribing and drafting. For border-area schools, language transfer guides (Malayalam↔Hindi, Malayalam↔ Kannada, and Malayalam ↔English) are essential for reducing improvisation and learner confusion. Such investments would transform inclusive practices from optional to institutionalised routines (Vaish 2019).

School–home partnerships

Parental expectations often reinforce monolingual and performance-driven demands. Schools can counter this by institutionalising trilingual parent workshops for each term, supported by demonstration videos and simple handouts. Normalising oral assessments, portfolio entries, and translanguaging practices within parental communication can strengthen legitimacy and reduce resistance.

Future directions

Future research should extend these findings by systematically evaluating the impact of oral fluency scales, script-sensitive rubrics, and portfolio-based assessments on learners' documented achievement. Design-based and quasi-experimental studies can test how such reforms influence not only literacy outcomes but also the dimensions of presence, participation, and achievement defined by the IEF (Ainscow 2020). In addition, research should refine translanguaging and

UDL frameworks by analyzing how script-specific dynamics (e.g. English opacity, Hindi transparency, Malayalam conjuncts) influence the oral–written gap for learners with different disability profiles, particularly those with dyslexia and ADHD. Comparative studies across Indian states and other multilingual contexts in the Global South would allow cross-cultural validation of these strategies and highlight how policy–assessment alignments vary across systems. Future studies may incorporate complementary tools such as teacher rating scales or structured observation rubrics to triangulate qualitative insights and generate measurable indicators of inclusive multilingual practices. Ultimately, longitudinal and mixed-method designs are necessary to track how assessment reform impacts motivation trajectories, learner identity, and equity outcomes over time. Such approaches would advance the theory, while providing robust, practice-relevant evidence for policymakers and teacher educators.

Conclusion

This investigation has shown that the success of the inclusion of students in trilingual classrooms across Kerala is fundamentally based on the ethical commitment of educators and innovative teaching and learning; however, the success of the initiative is limited because of the type of assessment regimes that highlight rapid, homogenous, and neatly written responses that shadow the progress of oral and multimodal competencies. Teachers encourage the use of inclusive practices through intervention strategies, such as decelerating the instructional tempo, strategic code-switching, and even collaborative scribing, to shift the conceptualisation of language diversity from a deficit to a pedagogical asset. However, students' accomplishments are often not recognised because of harsh and rigid assessment procedures. To alleviate these deficiencies, assessment protocols need to be entirely restructured to ask for measures of oral fluency, script-sensitive rubrics, and portfolio-based evidence. At the same time, professional development programmes need to emphasise disability- and script-specific actions, which should be based on exemplified translanguaging routines. Inclusion requires the allotment of a specific remedial time with adequate resource provision. However, theoretically, frameworks such as the Inclusive Education Framework, translanguaging theory, biliteracy continua, and Universal Design for Learning can provide explanatory power for the oral-written gap and its consequent exclusion of students due to a mismatch between policy and assessment. The research produces a realistic and cost-efficient reform agenda that recommends coordinated reforms in assessment, teacher education, and curricular planning to transition inclusion from an ad hoc and improvisational situation to one that is stable and system-wide. These insights, emerging from Kerala's relative advantages in public education–high literacy, a strong public school system, and a long history of social reform – provide relevant lessons for understanding other multilingual centres and settings with limited resources for institutionalising an inclusive practice. This study has limitations because it relied entirely on teacher self-reports, without observing classroom interactions. The reported practices may reflect perceived practices from a subjective perspective clouded by recall bias or social desirability effects. In line with the methodological issues inherent in interpretivist research, the researcher's positionality is likely to have influenced the interpretation of data, even with systematic reflexive procedures. Second, the sample was limited to a specific sociocultural setting in Kerala, and the extrapolation of the findings is not possible outside this area. Further research, utilising classroom ethnography, systematic lesson observation, and mixed-methods designs, is needed to gain a deeper understanding by examining the congruence between reported instructional practices and teachers' actual classroom behaviours.

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The data supporting this study's findings are not publicly available due to concerns regarding participant confidentiality. The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

K.G. Jeena http://orcid.org/0009-0006-8441-2329

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