Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences

Factors Affecting Inclusive Assessment Practices in Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the key factors influencing inclusive assessment practices among secondary school teachers in Tehran, with the goal of identifying institutional, pedagogical, and student-centered elements that shape assessment strategies in diverse classrooms. This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of teachers engaged in inclusive assessment. A purposive sample of 21 secondary school teachers from Tehran participated in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Themes and subthemes were identified through a systematic interpretation of recurring patterns in teacher narratives. The analysis revealed three overarching categories influencing inclusive assessment practices: institutional and policy-level factors, teacher-level practices and beliefs, and student-centered considerations. Institutional barriers included unclear policies, lack of administrative support, insufficient training, curriculum constraints, resource shortages, and exam-focused school culture. At the teacher level, beliefs about inclusion, assessment flexibility, differentiated practices, reflection, collaboration, emotional burden, and autonomy were central. Student-centered factors encompassed student participation, diverse learning needs, engagement, teacher-student relationships, and feedback practices. Teachers reported both enabling conditions and systemic challenges that affected their ability to implement inclusive assessments effectively. Inclusive assessment in secondary education is shaped by a complex interaction of structural, professional, and relational factors. While some teachers innovatively adapt practices to meet diverse needs, systemic obstacles such as vague policies, resource limitations, and exam-oriented culture hinder broader implementation. Effective inclusive assessment requires clear policy guidance, targeted professional development, administrative support, and a shift toward a more learner-centered educational ethos.

Keywords: Inclusive assessment, secondary education, teacher beliefs, institutional barriers, qualitative research, differentiated assessment, Tehran schools.

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central pillar in contemporary educational policy and practice, grounded in the belief that all students, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning profiles, have a right to equitable learning opportunities within mainstream educational settings (UNESCO, 2017). Among the many elements of inclusive education, assessment is a critical mechanism through which educational equity is either realized or hindered. Inclusive assessment refers to the process of designing and implementing evaluation methods that are fair, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners, including those with disabilities, linguistic differences, or varying socioeconomic backgrounds (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In secondary education, where high-stakes testing and standardized performance metrics dominate, fostering inclusive assessment practices presents a unique and complex challenge.

There is growing recognition in educational literature that assessment plays a significant role in shaping both instructional decisions and student outcomes. Yet, traditional assessment models often reflect a narrow definition of success and rely heavily on written exams, time-restricted tasks, and normative comparisons, which may disadvantage students with different learning needs (Brookhart, 2013). In contrast, inclusive assessment emphasizes formative approaches, differentiated tasks, and student participation, promoting not only academic achievement but also self-confidence and engagement among diverse learners (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). Despite its importance, the implementation of inclusive assessment remains uneven, particularly in secondary schools, where curriculum demands, teacher beliefs, institutional constraints, and a focus on accountability measures may limit educators' capacity or willingness to adapt assessment strategies (Berry, 2011; Florian, 2015).

Previous research highlights multiple factors that influence inclusive assessment practices. At the policy level, ambiguity in national or institutional guidelines can lead to inconsistent practices across schools and classrooms (López-González et al., 2019). In contexts where inclusive education is legislated but poorly operationalized, teachers are often left to interpret inclusive mandates on their own, leading to significant variation in practice. Administrative support and leadership also play a crucial role. Principals and school leaders who prioritize inclusion and provide flexibility in assessment policies can empower teachers to adopt student-centered assessment methods (DeLuca et al., 2019). Conversely, in schools with rigid bureaucratic structures, assessment is frequently reduced to standardized testing formats, undermining efforts at personalization and equity.

Professional development is another key factor. Research has repeatedly shown that many teachers feel underprepared to assess students with special needs or to design assessments that cater to diverse learning profiles (Cumming & Dickson, 2013; Forlin, 2010). In-service training opportunities, when provided, often lack depth, continuity, or practical relevance, leaving teachers with limited knowledge of inclusive assessment techniques (Adie, 2013). This gap in professional knowledge contributes to what Florian and Rouse (2009) refer to as the "pedagogical anxiety" of inclusion, where educators fear they may be doing more harm than good due to insufficient preparation or support.

On an individual level, teachers' beliefs and attitudes significantly influence whether and how inclusive assessment is practiced. Some educators perceive inclusion as incompatible with academic rigor, while others struggle with notions of fairness and equality in grading (Spratt & Florian, 2015). Teachers who view assessment as a tool for learning, rather than merely a means of sorting students, are more likely to adopt flexible, inclusive methods such as portfolios, peer assessments, and differentiated rubrics (Tomlinson, 2014). Furthermore, educators' reflective practices—such as reviewing past assessment experiences, analyzing student feedback, and collaborating with peers—have been found to support the development of more inclusive approaches (Klenowski, 2009).

At the classroom level, assessment strategies must also be responsive to the relational dynamics between teachers and students. Trust, communication, and emotional support are integral to effective assessment, particularly for learners who may feel marginalized or anxious in traditional academic environments (Hargreaves, 2000). Research suggests that inclusive assessment fosters greater student agency and motivation by involving learners in goal-setting, self-assessment, and feedback processes (Black & Wiliam, 2009). However, teachers often report challenges in managing these practices within large classes, time constraints, and rigid curricular frameworks (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010). Moreover, in secondary education where subject specialization and departmental divisions are pronounced, collaboration around inclusive assessment is often minimal, making systemic reform difficult to sustain (Nugent et al., 2020).

Contextual variables further complicate the landscape of inclusive assessment in secondary schools. In Iran, for instance, the educational system has undergone reforms aimed at promoting inclusion, yet many schools continue to operate under centralized, exam-driven models that discourage individualized learning and assessment (Fazel & Afkham, 2014). Studies on Iranian teachers' experiences with inclusion indicate a tension between policy rhetoric and classroom reality, with teachers

citing insufficient resources, limited professional autonomy, and sociocultural stigma as persistent barriers (Mohammadpour et al., 2018). While inclusive education has been formally adopted as a national strategy, its translation into assessment practices remains fragmented and under-researched, particularly in the secondary education sector.

The present study seeks to address this gap by exploring the factors that shape inclusive assessment practices among secondary school teachers in Tehran. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, this research investigates how teachers interpret, negotiate, and implement assessment strategies within the broader institutional and cultural context. The study adopts a constructivist lens, recognizing that assessment is not merely a technical act but a socially embedded practice influenced by individual beliefs, institutional norms, and systemic pressures (Gipps, 1999). By capturing the lived experiences of teachers, the study aims to identify both the enabling conditions and the structural barriers that affect inclusive assessment.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing international literature on inclusive education by providing empirical insights from a non-Western context, where inclusive reforms are in progress but face distinct implementation challenges. Second, it focuses specifically on assessment, a dimension of pedagogy that is both underexamined and critically important in debates on equity and quality in education (Stiggins, 2005). Third, by foregrounding the voices of practitioners, the study offers practical implications for teacher training, policy formulation, and institutional leadership aimed at fostering more inclusive educational environments.

In doing so, the study responds to the broader call for educational systems to move beyond rhetoric and toward practice that truly supports all learners. As UNESCO (2020) has emphasized, inclusive education is not merely about physical access to schools but about transforming teaching and learning to accommodate and celebrate diversity. Assessment, as both a driver and a reflection of educational values, must be at the heart of this transformation. Understanding the realities faced by secondary teachers in implementing inclusive assessment is thus a necessary step toward building more responsive, equitable, and learner-centered schools.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the factors influencing inclusive assessment practices in secondary education. A phenomenological approach was adopted to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of educators who actively engage in assessment practices within diverse classroom settings. The participants consisted of 21 secondary school teachers from Tehran, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in inclusive education and assessment. The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring that no new themes or significant insights emerged from additional interviews. The participants represented a variety of subject areas, levels of teaching experience, and school types (public and private), thereby enhancing the diversity and richness of the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants the flexibility to share their perspectives while enabling the researcher to probe for deeper information related to assessment inclusivity. The interviews were guided by a flexible protocol covering topics such as assessment design, accommodations for students with special needs, perceived institutional support, and challenges encountered in implementing inclusive assessment strategies. Each interview

lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted in person at locations convenient to the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. Transcripts were coded and organized using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic data management and theme development. The coding process involved iterative cycles of open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurring patterns and conceptual categories. Attention was given to both explicit and latent content, with the goal of generating comprehensive themes that reflect the complexity of inclusive assessment practices. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking to ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Findings and Results

The study sample comprised 21 secondary school teachers from various districts of Tehran who participated in the research through purposive sampling. Of the participants, 13 were female and 8 were male. In terms of teaching experience, 6 teachers had between 1 to 5 years of experience, 8 had between 6 to 15 years, and 7 had more than 15 years of teaching experience. Participants taught a range of subjects, including mathematics (n = 4), science (n = 5), literature (n = 4), English (n = 3), social studies (n = 3), and physical education (n = 2). Regarding educational background, 16 participants held bachelor's degrees in education or related fields, while 5 held master's degrees. Additionally, 14 of the teachers were employed in public schools and 7 in private institutions. This diversity in demographic characteristics provided a broad range of perspectives on inclusive assessment practices within the secondary education context.

1. Institutional and Policy-Level Factors

One of the critical institutional-level barriers to inclusive assessment is the **lack of clarity in assessment policies**. Participants frequently mentioned the absence of clear, consistent guidelines that support inclusion. Policies are often broad or outdated, leading to confusion about implementation. As one teacher remarked, "They tell us to assess all students fairly, but there's no definition of what 'fair' really means in a diverse classroom." This lack of direction leaves teachers uncertain about whether their practices align with official expectations.

Administrative support emerged as a crucial enabler of inclusive assessment. Participants who felt supported by school leadership reported greater freedom to adapt assessment strategies. However, several interviewees noted inconsistencies in how support is provided across schools. One participant explained, "My principal is flexible and trusts my judgment, but my colleague in another school says her supervisor insists on standard exams for everyone." Administrative attitudes appear to significantly shape how inclusion is realized at the classroom level.

Training opportunities were widely perceived as insufficient or poorly aligned with teachers' real needs. While some had attended professional development sessions, these were often superficial and lacked practical application. "The workshops we get are usually general and not focused on inclusive assessment. I still don't know how to modify a test for a dyslexic student," shared one participant. The findings point to a need for sustained, expert-led training with classroom-oriented examples.

Participants also highlighted **curriculum constraints** as a structural limitation. A rigid, overloaded curriculum leaves little room for flexibility in assessment design. "There's so much to cover that I can't think about adapting tests. I just need to move fast," said one respondent. Time pressure and exam-driven content inhibit the ability to tailor assessment for students with diverse needs.

Resource allocation was another pressing concern. Many teachers noted the absence of assistive technologies and support personnel, which limited their ability to implement inclusive strategies. As one participant put it, "I wish we had access to speech-to-text tools or even just someone to help during exams. But we don't." Material shortages were a common theme across interview settings.

Finally, **school culture** plays a vital role. In highly competitive or exam-centric environments, inclusive practices are often deprioritized. "Everything is about top scores and rankings. There's no room to slow down for weaker students," one teacher lamented. This culture, driven by high-stakes testing, contributes to resistance against alternative assessment methods.

2. Teacher-Level Practices and Beliefs

A major influence on assessment practice is teachers' **beliefs about inclusion**. Some view inclusive strategies as burdensome or incompatible with merit-based systems. "It's not that I don't care—it just feels like extra work, and I'm not sure it's fair to others," one teacher reflected. Misconceptions about equity versus equality surfaced repeatedly, often shaping attitudes toward differentiated assessment.

The concept of **assessment flexibility** was embraced by several participants as essential. Teachers who experimented with alternative formats, such as oral exams, portfolios, and extended time, reported positive outcomes. "One of my students panics in written tests, but she explains things so well when we talk. Giving her oral tests changed everything," shared a participant. Flexibility emerged as both a strategy and a mindset shift.

Use of differentiated assessment was actively practiced by some, involving tasks tailored to students' levels, strengths, and needs. These included scaffolding, adjusting task complexity, and allowing choice in demonstrating learning. "I let them choose between a poster, a presentation, or a written essay. They all hit the objectives, just in different ways," explained one teacher. This strategy was cited as particularly effective in mixed-ability classrooms.

Many teachers engaged in **reflective practice**, evaluating and revising their assessment methods over time. They discussed learning from past experiences, peer conversations, and student feedback. "After one failed test, I realized I hadn't considered the reading level. That taught me a lot," recounted one teacher. Reflective cycles helped align practices with inclusive goals.

Collaboration with colleagues also facilitated more inclusive assessment. Shared planning and cross-subject discussions helped teachers develop new ideas and reduce the burden of individual innovation. One participant noted, "We started doing peer review across classes. It helps all of us learn how to grade more fairly and understand different learners."

However, the **emotional and cognitive load** of implementing inclusive practices was a recurring theme. Teachers described feelings of burnout, inadequacy, and isolation. "You feel like you're expected to be a psychologist, a teacher, a parent… it's overwhelming," one teacher shared. These pressures often hinder consistent adoption of inclusive assessment methods.

At the same time, some educators valued their **autonomy in assessment**, which enabled experimentation and adaptation. "No one tells me how to grade, so I can innovate a bit," said one teacher. However, the degree of autonomy varied widely across schools, depending on administrative expectations and school culture.

3. Student-Centered Considerations

Participants emphasized the importance of **student participation in assessment**. Involving students in decisions—such as developing rubrics or providing feedback—was linked to greater ownership and engagement. "When they help create the rubric, they care more about doing well. It feels fair to them," said one respondent.

Teachers also reported facing challenges in meeting **diverse learning needs**. These included students with disabilities, language barriers, and attention difficulties. "I have students who can't focus for ten minutes, and others who don't understand the test language. I need to create two or three versions sometimes," one participant explained. The diversity of learners required continual adaptation.

Motivation and engagement were closely tied to assessment methods. Traditional tests often triggered anxiety and disengagement, while creative, relevant tasks increased effort and interest. One teacher remarked, "When I turn the assignment into a real-life project, even the quiet students get involved. They stop being afraid of failing."

Positive **relationships with students** were seen as foundational to inclusive assessment. Teachers who established trust and open communication found it easier to understand students' challenges and adapt accordingly. "When they feel safe, they tell you what's hard for them, and you can adjust things together," said a participant.

Lastly, **feedback practices** were discussed as a vital component. Individualized, constructive feedback helped students understand their progress and set personal goals. "Grades don't tell them much. But when I explain what they did well and where to improve, they grow," one teacher noted. Emphasis was placed on formative over summative feedback to support learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the factors influencing inclusive assessment practices among secondary school teachers in Tehran. The findings revealed a complex interplay of institutional, teacher-related, and student-centered factors that collectively shape how inclusive assessment is understood, approached, and implemented. Through the lens of the participants' lived experiences, three overarching categories emerged: institutional and policy-level factors, teacher-level practices and beliefs, and student-centered considerations. Each category included subthemes that provided deeper insights into the practical and emotional realities of educators striving to implement inclusive assessment within a traditionally exam-driven system.

At the institutional level, the lack of clear assessment policies emerged as a major obstacle. Teachers consistently reported that ambiguous or overly generalized national and school-level directives created uncertainty about how to align inclusive practices with accountability expectations. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that policy vagueness contributes to inconsistent practices and a lack of cohesion across educational systems (López-González et al., 2019). Without specific guidelines that define inclusivity within assessment frameworks, teachers are left to interpret inclusive mandates on their own, which often leads to hesitant or conservative implementation (Adie, 2013). Moreover, curriculum constraints and time limitations compounded the problem, reflecting concerns raised by Florian and Rouse (2009), who argue that overburdened curricula and rigid pacing schedules are among the most significant barriers to inclusion in secondary schools.

Administrative support was another key factor influencing the extent to which inclusive assessment could be practiced. Teachers who reported strong leadership support expressed more confidence in deviating from conventional assessments and experimenting with differentiated methods. Conversely, those in less supportive environments felt constrained by rigid expectations and institutional resistance to innovation. These observations are consistent with findings by DeLuca, LaPointe-McEwan, and Luhanga (2019), who emphasized the critical role of school leadership in fostering teacher agency and promoting assessment literacy. In our study, supportive administrators enabled teachers to take risks and explore student-centered strategies, thereby reinforcing the argument that school leadership can either catalyze or impede inclusive reform.

A significant barrier identified across interviews was the inadequacy of professional development opportunities. Teachers reported that most available workshops were either too general or lacked depth, often failing to provide actionable strategies for inclusive assessment. This is in line with research by Cumming and Dickson (2013), who found that many professional development initiatives in inclusive education are insufficiently grounded in classroom realities. Forlin (2010) similarly argues that without sustained, practice-oriented training, teachers may struggle to internalize inclusive values or apply them effectively in assessment contexts. The need for ongoing, reflective, and subject-specific training was a recurrent theme in this study,

suggesting that capacity-building efforts must be restructured to genuinely support educators in meeting the needs of diverse learners.

Another critical institutional factor was the allocation of resources, particularly with regard to assistive technologies, teaching aides, and specialized personnel. Participants expressed frustration over the lack of material and human resources necessary to implement inclusive practices meaningfully. As noted by Berry (2011), inclusion without resources can inadvertently reinforce educational inequities, especially in systems where teachers are already under pressure to meet standardized benchmarks. In the Iranian context, where resource disparities between public and private schools are pronounced, this issue becomes even more acute (Fazel & Afkham, 2014). Several teachers in this study reported having to personally fund supplementary materials or create alternative assessments without technical support—an unsustainable burden that could lead to burnout or disillusionment.

School culture was also highlighted as a structural influence on assessment. In highly exam-oriented environments, inclusive practices are often viewed as distractions or compromises to academic rigor. Teachers noted that schools emphasizing rankings and standardized test performance were less receptive to alternative assessments. This finding supports earlier claims by Booth and Ainscow (2016), who caution that institutional cultures focused solely on measurable outcomes tend to marginalize students who do not fit the normative mold. The present study reinforces the idea that cultivating a culture of inclusion requires more than policy mandates—it demands a fundamental shift in the values and priorities that underpin institutional life.

At the teacher level, beliefs and attitudes were found to be powerful determinants of assessment behavior. Some participants viewed inclusive assessment as an ethical imperative, while others perceived it as additional work or a potential threat to fairness. These divergent views reflect what Spratt and Florian (2015) term "belief-driven implementation," wherein personal convictions about teaching and learning significantly influence classroom practices. Teachers who embraced inclusive philosophies were more likely to employ flexible, differentiated, and formative assessments. This supports the argument by Tomlinson (2014) that teacher mindset is a prerequisite for differentiated instruction and evaluation.

Participants who practiced assessment flexibility described using varied formats—such as oral exams, open-ended projects, or portfolios—to accommodate students' individual strengths and limitations. These strategies echo findings from Black and Wiliam (2009), who argue that flexibility in assessment format enhances both accessibility and student engagement. Differentiated assessment was especially beneficial in classrooms with high levels of learner diversity. Teachers noted that allowing students to demonstrate understanding in different ways not only increased participation but also reduced anxiety, aligning with Florian and Black-Hawkins's (2011) inclusive pedagogy framework.

Teachers' capacity for reflective practice emerged as another facilitator of inclusive assessment. Educators who regularly evaluated their assessment outcomes, sought student feedback, or engaged in peer discussion were more adaptable and responsive to learner needs. This aligns with Klenowski's (2009) assertion that reflective practice is central to developing inclusive assessment literacy. However, such reflection was often undertaken in isolation, as institutional structures for collaborative review were generally lacking.

While some teachers benefited from collaboration with colleagues, others found departmental silos and lack of common planning time to be barriers. Where collaboration did occur, it fostered innovation and shared responsibility, consistent with research by DeLuca and Klinger (2010). Importantly, peer learning appeared to mitigate the emotional and cognitive burden of inclusive practice. Several participants reported experiencing emotional fatigue, burnout, or feelings of inadequacy, particularly when institutional support was absent. These findings resonate with Hargreaves (2000), who notes that teaching in inclusive settings involves a significant emotional dimension that is often overlooked in policy discourse.

Interestingly, some teachers appreciated their autonomy in assessment, using it as an opportunity to tailor evaluations to student needs. However, others reported that autonomy without support led to insecurity and inconsistency. This finding supports the nuanced view of autonomy presented by Gipps (1999), who argues that freedom in assessment must be accompanied by adequate support structures and professional development in order to be effective.

The third major theme in the findings revolved around student-centered considerations. Participants emphasized the importance of involving students in assessment processes, including setting goals, co-constructing rubrics, and providing feedback. These practices align with Black and Wiliam's (2009) concept of formative assessment as a collaborative process that enhances learning through dialogue. Student involvement was reported to increase motivation, reduce assessment anxiety, and promote a sense of fairness—benefits that are well-documented in the inclusive assessment literature (Tomlinson, 2014).

Teachers also spoke of the challenges involved in meeting diverse learning needs, particularly in large classrooms with limited support. Students with disabilities, attention difficulties, or language barriers were especially vulnerable to being overlooked. This underscores the need for multi-tiered assessment strategies, as advocated by Booth and Ainscow (2016), that are both scalable and responsive to individual learning profiles.

Participants frequently linked inclusive assessment to student motivation and engagement, reporting that traditional exams often triggered stress and disengagement, whereas creative and relevant tasks elicited greater enthusiasm. This is consistent with findings by Berry (2011), who argues that inclusive assessment is as much about emotional safety as it is about academic measurement. Finally, strong teacher-student relationships and effective feedback practices were found to be cornerstones of inclusive assessment. Teachers who maintained trust-based, communicative relationships with students were more successful in identifying barriers and co-creating solutions. The importance of individualized, constructive feedback was emphasized throughout the data, reinforcing the formative assessment principles proposed by Stiggins (2005).

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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