

Culturally Inclusive Practices in International Schools: An Ecological Mixed-Methods Study

Hemant Goyal

University College Fairview

Abstract

This study examines how teachers in international schools understand and enact culturally inclusive practices (CIP), and the institutional conditions shaping their work. Framed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, CIP is conceptualised as an ecological phenomenon emerging from interactions between teacher beliefs, classroom practice, and institutional structures.

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. Survey data from 53 teachers in Singapore and Malaysia identified patterns in understanding, enactment, perceived barriers, and institutional support. Follow-up interviews with six teachers explored how these patterns were experienced in practice.

Findings indicate strong conceptual commitment to CIP, but uneven enactment. A recurring commitment–capacity gap emerged, with implementation strongest in flexible classroom practices and weaker in structurally constrained domains such as assessment and instructional adaptation. Key constraints included time, access to culturally diverse resources, and variability in professional learning and institutional coherence.

The study reframes culturally inclusive practice as a systemically enabled endeavour and highlights the importance of alignment between teacher commitment and institutional conditions in sustaining inclusive pedagogy in international school contexts.

Keywords: *culturally inclusive practices; international schools; ecological systems theory; teacher perspectives; mixed-methods research*

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedented human mobility, reshaping global demographics. Over 281 million people now live outside their countries of birth, with a further 725 million migrating within national borders (International Organization for Migration, 2024). These shifts continue to impact education systems, especially international schools which are characterised by high levels of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity among both students and teachers (Bunnell, 2016; Hayden & Thompson, 2013). In response, international curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) emphasise global citizenship, intercultural understanding, and international-mindedness as core educational aims (IBO, 2017).

Realising these aims, however, requires more than symbolic recognition of diversity. It calls for pedagogical approaches that meaningfully integrate students' cultural identities into teaching and learning. Such approaches are conceptualised as culturally inclusive practices (CIP), which extend beyond classroom strategies to encompass broader curricular, institutional, and relational dimensions of inclusion (Bennett, 2010; Holliday, 2011). In increasingly diverse international school contexts, CIP has become central to ensuring that all students experience belonging, engagement, and equitable access to learning.

Research Problem

Despite widespread endorsement of inclusive values, the enactment of culturally inclusive practices remains uneven. While teachers often express strong commitment to inclusion, translating these principles into consistent classroom practice presents ongoing challenges (Civitillo et al., 2018; Romijn et al., 2021). This disconnect is particularly visible in areas requiring deeper pedagogical or structural adaptation, such as instructional design and assessment.

Several factors contribute to this gap. First, cultural inclusion remains a concept that is interpreted variably across contexts, leading to differences in how teachers understand and operationalise it (Glock et al., 2019; Knoblauch, 2023). Second, school-level approaches to diversity are frequently limited to symbolic or surface-level practices, with limited integration into core pedagogy (Sleeter, 2001). Third, teachers operate within institutional environments shaped by time constraints, resource availability, collaboration structures, and policy expectations, all of which influence what is feasible in practice (Heng & Lim, 2021).

These challenges are amplified in Southeast Asian international school contexts, where high student mobility, multilingualism, and curricular hybridity create complex conditions for inclusive teaching. Yet empirical research examining how teachers in these contexts understand and enact culturally inclusive practices remains limited.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study addresses this gap by examining how teachers in international schools conceptualise and enact culturally inclusive practices, the barriers they encounter, and the institutional conditions shaping their work. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979),

the study positions CIP as an ecological phenomenon shaped by interactions across classroom, relational, and institutional systems.

The study is guided by four research questions: what are international school teachers' understandings of culturally inclusive practices; how do teachers translate their understanding of culturally inclusive practices into classroom pedagogy; what barriers do teachers encounter when implementing culturally inclusive practices; and what forms of institutional support and professional learning do teachers perceive as effective in overcoming these barriers.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it reframes culturally inclusive practice as a systemically shaped phenomenon rather than an individual pedagogical choice, foregrounding the interaction between teacher beliefs and institutional conditions. Second, it introduces the concept of a commitment–capacity gap to explain the discrepancy between teachers' inclusive intentions and their enacted practice. Third, it provides empirical insight into international school contexts in Southeast Asia, which remain underrepresented in research on culturally inclusive education.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is situated within literature on culturally inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy, and is analytically framed using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST). Together, these perspectives support an understanding of culturally inclusive practices (CIP) as both pedagogical and systemic, shaped through interactions between teacher beliefs, classroom practices, and institutional conditions.

Culturally Inclusive Practices in International School Contexts

Culturally inclusive practices are broadly understood as pedagogical approaches that recognise, value, and integrate students' cultural and linguistic identities into teaching and learning processes (Banks, 2015; Gay, 2013). While often discussed alongside culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), CIP in this study is conceptualised as extending beyond representation or celebration of diversity towards the sustained integration of students' identities within curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

This distinction is particularly significant in international school contexts, which are characterised by linguistic diversity, high student mobility, and heterogeneous cultural identities. In such environments, inclusion cannot be reduced to discrete cultural events or symbolic recognition, but must be embedded within everyday pedagogical decision-making. However, existing literature suggests that while teachers often express strong commitment to inclusive

values, the translation of these values into consistent classroom practice remains uneven (Civitillo et al., 2018; Romijn et al., 2021).

An Ecological Perspective on Inclusive Practice

To move beyond individualised accounts of teacher practice, this study adopts an ecological lens. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory conceptualises human development as shaped by interactions across nested systems, including the microsystem (immediate environments), mesosystem (relationships between settings), and exosystem (broader institutional structures).

Applied to culturally inclusive pedagogy, this framework enables analysis of how inclusion is shaped across multiple levels. At the microsystem level, teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and reflective practices influence how inclusion is conceptualised and enacted. At the mesosystem level, collaboration, professional relationships, and shared routines mediate how practices are developed and sustained. At the exosystem level, leadership priorities, policy frameworks, resourcing, and professional learning structures shape the conditions under which inclusive practices are supported or constrained.

This ecological perspective shifts the analytical focus from individual teacher disposition to the broader conditions that enable or limit inclusive practice. It provides a conceptual foundation for examining why strong commitment to inclusion does not necessarily translate into consistent enactment.

Table 1

System	Definition	Application to CIP
Microsystem	Immediate settings such as classrooms and peer relationships	Teacher-student interactions, culturally responsive pedagogy, differentiation
Mesosystem	Interconnections between microsystems	Collaboration between teachers, engagement with families, team teaching
Exosystem	Indirect influences such as school policies or leadership decisions	Availability of inclusive curriculum, professional development opportunities, school-wide support
Macrosystem	Broader cultural and societal ideologies	Dominant cultural values, societal attitudes toward inclusion and diversity
Chronosystem	Temporal dimension, life transitions or historical events	Changes in teachers' experience, evolving diversity discourses, policy reforms over time

Application of Ecological Systems Theory to Culturally Inclusive Practices **Analytical Framework**

Building on this ecological perspective, the study introduces two complementary analytical distinctions to examine culturally inclusive practices in greater depth.

First, teachers' understanding of CIP is conceptualised across three dimensions: declarative understanding (valuing inclusion and distinguishing it from surface-level cultural celebration); applied understanding (the ability to articulate what inclusion looks like within one's classroom context); and reflective understanding (the ongoing interrogation of personal cultural assumptions and their influence on practice).

Second, the enactment of CIP is interpreted across three levels: surface enactment (adaptations to materials and classroom interactions); instructional enactment (adjustments to teaching approaches and communication patterns); and structural enactment (modifications to assessment practices and formal expectations of learning).

These distinctions provide analytical clarity in examining variation within and across teachers' practices. They also enable a more precise interpretation of the relationship between understanding and enactment, particularly in identifying where alignment or disjunction occurs.

Together, the ecological framing and these analytical dimensions underpin the study's central proposition: that culturally inclusive practice is not solely a function of teacher intention, but is shaped by the interaction between individual commitment and the systemic conditions in which teaching is embedded.

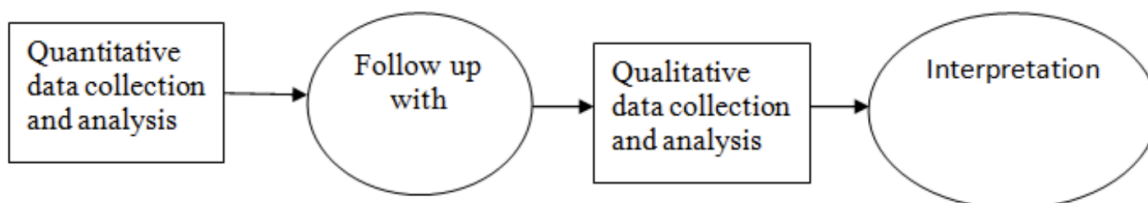
Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopts a pragmatic paradigm and employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative findings inform subsequent qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Ivankova et al., 2006). This design is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Explanatory Sequential Design



The quantitative phase identified patterns in teachers' understandings, classroom practices, perceived barriers, and institutional support related to culturally inclusive practices (CIP). The qualitative phase then explored how these patterns were experienced and interpreted in practice, enabling both breadth and depth of analysis.

Participants and Context

Quantitative phase. Fifty-three teachers from international schools in Singapore (68%) and Malaysia (28%) participated in the survey. Participants represented a range of teaching experience (34% with 7–9 years; 32% with 10+ years) and curriculum frameworks (57% IB; 21% British; 9% American). Most participants (79%) were multilingual, and 64% had undertaken diversity or inclusion-related professional learning within the past year.

Qualitative phase. Six teachers were purposively selected from survey volunteers to ensure variation in teaching experience, curriculum context, and prior exposure to inclusion-focused professional learning.

Data Collection

Survey instrument. A 24-item survey using a five-point Likert scale was developed to assess four constructs: understanding of CIP, classroom implementation, perceived barriers, and institutional support. Items were adapted from established instruments (Glock et al., 2019; Civitillo et al., 2018; Romijn et al., 2021) and aligned with the study's research questions. The instrument was piloted with six educators and refined for clarity and usability. Internal consistency was acceptable to good across constructs (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.787$ – 0.868).

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) explored teachers' conceptualisations of CIP, classroom practices, encountered barriers, and perceptions of institutional support. Interview questions were informed by survey findings and the ecological framework.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentages) in Microsoft Excel and SPSS to identify patterns across participants.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Coding combined deductive categories informed by the research questions and ecological framework with inductive codes emerging from participants' accounts.

Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, with qualitative findings used to explain and contextualise quantitative patterns.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols followed BERA (2018) guidelines. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Survey responses were anonymous, and interview data were anonymised using pseudonyms. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices.

Findings

Reliability of Survey Constructs

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70, indicating acceptable to good reliability for exploratory research (Taber, 2018).

Table 2

Cronbach's Alpha for Survey Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Understanding of CIP	4	0.868	Good
Implementation Practices	4	0.833	Good
Barriers to Implementation	4	0.808	Good
Support and Professional Learning	4	0.787	Acceptable

Teacher Understanding of Culturally Inclusive Practices

Table 3

Item-level descriptive statistics for teacher understanding (n = 53; all items compulsory)

#	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Agree / Strongly Agree
1	I can clearly distinguish between celebrating cultural diversity and embedding cultural inclusion in classroom teaching.	4.23	0.72	83%
2	I feel confident explaining what culturally inclusive practices mean in my classroom context.	4.15	0.76	81%
3	I regularly reflect on my own cultural assumptions and how they influence my lesson planning.	4.04	0.82	72%
4	I believe culturally inclusive teaching contributes to students' sense of belonging and global citizenship.	4.34	0.67	89%

Teachers demonstrated strong conceptual commitment to culturally inclusive practices. Agreement was highest for the value of inclusion (M = 4.34) and the ability to distinguish between cultural celebration and deeper pedagogical inclusion (M = 4.23). Confidence in explaining CIP was similarly high (M = 4.15).

Reflective engagement showed greater variability (M = 4.04), indicating that while inclusive principles are widely endorsed, sustained self-reflection is less consistently enacted.

Qualitative findings reinforced this pattern. Teachers described CIP as relational and embedded in everyday practice, often framed as "making sure every child feels seen." At the same time, several participants indicated that articulating and sustaining this understanding remained a work in progress. One teacher noted, "I can explain it, but I'm still figuring out how to express it simply," while another reflected, "I catch myself planning from my own perspective first."

Together, these findings indicate strong conceptual alignment with inclusion, alongside uneven depth in reflective practice.

Classroom Implementation of Culturally Inclusive Practices

Table 4

Item-level descriptive statistics for classroom implementation (n = 53; all items compulsory)

#	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Agree / Strongly Agree
1	I adapt lesson materials and examples to reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of my students.	4.00	0.73	77%
2	Whenever possible, I encourage students to share their home languages and cultural knowledge in class activities.	3.89	0.74	70%
3	I adjust my teaching approaches to suit students' varied communication patterns and learning preferences influenced by culture.	3.77	0.79	58%
4	I design or adapt assessment tasks to allow students to express understanding through culturally relevant examples or perspectives.	3.81	0.85	68%

Reported implementation was consistently lower than conceptual understanding, indicating a gap between inclusive intent and enacted practice. Teachers most frequently reported adapting lesson materials (M = 4.00) and encouraging students to share cultural and linguistic knowledge (M = 3.89).

Practices requiring deeper pedagogical or structural change showed lower endorsement. Adjusting teaching approaches (M = 3.77) and adapting assessment (M = 3.81) were less consistently enacted.

Interview data clarified this pattern. Teachers described material and interactional adaptations as manageable within existing routines. One participant noted, "Even if the unit is fixed, I change the examples so students recognise themselves in the learning." In contrast, assessment and instructional adaptations were described as more constrained. As one teacher explained, "I want to adapt more, but I'm not always sure what I'm allowed to change."

These findings suggest a gradient in implementation, with inclusive practices more readily enacted in flexible classroom domains and less consistently enacted where practices intersect with curriculum expectations and assessment structures.

Perceived Barriers to Implementing Culturally Inclusive Practices

Table 5

Item-level descriptive statistics for perceived barriers (n = 53; all items compulsory)

#	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Agree / Strongly Agree
1	I lack access to appropriate teaching materials and classroom examples that reflect cultural diversity.	3.62	0.96	58%
2	I find it challenging to meet the learning needs of students who are not native English speakers.	3.74	0.93	58%
3	There are limited opportunities to collaborate with colleagues on culturally inclusive teaching.	3.57	0.84	57%
4	School policies or schedules limit the time and flexibility needed to plan inclusive lessons.	3.62	0.92	58%

Teachers reported moderate but consistent barriers to implementation. The most strongly endorsed challenge was supporting multilingual learners (M = 3.74), followed by limited access to culturally diverse materials and time constraints (both M = 3.62). Opportunities for collaboration were also reported as limited (M = 3.57).

Qualitative findings illustrated how these barriers interact in practice. Teachers described inclusive planning as requiring additional time and effort within already demanding workloads. As one participant explained, "I want to do more, but most days I'm just trying to keep up." Limited collaboration further constrained implementation, with one teacher noting, "We talk about inclusion in general terms, but not cultural inclusion."

These findings indicate that barriers are not isolated challenges but interconnected constraints related to time, resources, and instructional support.

Institutional Support and Professional Learning Needs

Table 6

Item-level descriptive statistics for institutional support (n = 53; all items compulsory)

#	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Agree / Strongly Agree
1	My school offers regular, practical professional development sessions focused on inclusion and cultural diversity.	3.57	0.79	57%
2	School leaders model and monitor the implementation of culturally inclusive teaching practices.	3.53	0.86	49%
3	I would benefit from structured mentorship or ongoing coaching to strengthen culturally inclusive teaching.	3.66	0.73	62%
4	There is a clear, school-wide framework or policy guiding culturally inclusive practices.	3.47	0.84	47%

Perceived institutional support was moderate and lower than levels of conceptual understanding and implementation. The strongest endorsement was for the need for structured mentorship or ongoing coaching (M = 3.66), indicating a clear demand for sustained, practice-focused professional learning.

Lower agreement was observed for leadership modelling (M = 3.53) and the presence of a clear school-wide framework (M = 3.47), suggesting variability in how inclusion is operationalised within schools.

Interview data reinforced these patterns. Teachers expressed a preference for practice-embedded learning over one-off workshops. As one participant noted, "I don't need another lecture. I need someone to sit with me and help me think through my unit." The absence of shared frameworks created uncertainty, with inclusion described as "valued but not clearly defined in practice."

These findings highlight the importance of coherent institutional structures in supporting sustained inclusive practice.

Integrated Summary

Across all four research questions, a consistent pattern emerged. Teachers demonstrated strong conceptual commitment to culturally inclusive practices, yet their capacity to enact these practices consistently was shaped by time constraints, resource availability, collaboration structures, and institutional support.

This pattern reflects a gap between commitment and capacity. Teachers expressed clear alignment with inclusive values and reported active efforts to adapt classroom practice. However, implementation was strongest in flexible domains such as materials and interaction, and less consistent where practices required instructional or structural change.

Qualitative findings clarified that this gap is not driven by lack of motivation, but by the conditions under which teaching is organised. Barriers related to time, resources, and collaboration, alongside uneven institutional support, shape what is feasible in practice.

Taken together, the findings indicate that culturally inclusive practice is influenced by interactions between teacher beliefs, classroom practice, and institutional structures, rather than individual intention alone.

Discussion

Teachers' Understanding of Culturally Inclusive Practices

Findings indicate that teachers' understanding of culturally inclusive practices is differentiated rather than uniform. While teachers demonstrated strong declarative understanding (valuing inclusion and distinguishing it from cultural celebration) and applied understanding (articulating CIP within their classroom context), reflective engagement was less consistently enacted.

This distinction is significant. Reflective capacity underpins teachers' ability to interrogate their own cultural assumptions and adapt practice responsively (Civitillo et al., 2018; Gay, 2013). Without sustained reflection, inclusive intentions risk remaining at the level of principle rather than becoming embedded in pedagogical decision-making. The findings therefore extend existing literature by showing that conceptual commitment alone does not ensure depth of practice; it must be accompanied by structured opportunities for reflection.

From an ecological perspective, this differentiation is located within the microsystem, where teacher beliefs, prior experiences, and reflective habits shape how inclusion is understood. However, the unevenness of reflective engagement suggests that individual cognition is insufficient in isolation. Reflective practice requires reinforcement through professional dialogue and institutional routines if it is to be sustained over time.

The Commitment–Capacity Gap in Classroom Enactment

The findings reveal a consistent gap between teachers' inclusive intentions and their enacted practice. This commitment–capacity gap reflects not a lack of motivation, but the conditions under which teaching is organised.

Teachers most readily enacted CIP through adaptations to materials and classroom interactions. These forms of practice are flexible, visible, and largely within teacher control. In contrast, enactment was less consistent in areas requiring deeper pedagogical or structural change, particularly instructional adaptation and assessment design. These domains are more tightly bound to curriculum expectations, shared norms, and accountability structures.

This gradient in enactment clarifies the nature of the gap. As practice moves from surface-level adjustments to instructional and structural domains, teachers' agency becomes increasingly mediated by institutional conditions. Bronfenbrenner's framework helps explain this pattern: microsystem-level agency is progressively shaped by mesosystem expectations and exosystem constraints.

This interpretation extends prior research by reframing uneven implementation not as inconsistency in teacher practice, but as a function of how different domains of teaching are structured and regulated. The implication is that strengthening inclusive practice requires expanding capacity at the instructional and structural levels, rather than focusing solely on teacher intention.

Barriers as Ecological Constraints

Perceived barriers to culturally inclusive practice are best understood as systemic constraints rather than individual shortcomings. While teachers identified challenges such as supporting multilingual learners, limited access to resources, and restricted collaboration, these were experienced as interconnected rather than isolated.

Time emerged as a central organising constraint, shaping teachers' ability to plan and enact inclusive practices deliberately. Resource limitations and limited collaboration structures further compounded this constraint, reinforcing a pattern in which inclusion becomes an additional layer of work rather than an integrated aspect of pedagogy.

These findings align with literature highlighting the gap between institutional rhetoric and classroom reality (Heng & Lim, 2021; Holliday, 2011), but extend it by demonstrating how constraints operate cumulatively across ecological levels. Challenges associated with multilingual learners are located within the microsystem, but are intensified by mesosystem limitations in collaboration and exosystem constraints related to time, policy, and resource allocation.

This ecological interpretation shifts the analytical focus from teacher deficit to system design. Teachers' accounts consistently reflected commitment to inclusion, but also revealed the structural conditions that delimit what is possible in practice.

Institutional Support as Enabling Infrastructure

Findings position institutional support as the key enabling condition for sustained culturally inclusive practice. Teachers consistently emphasised the importance of mentorship, collaborative routines, and coherent school-wide frameworks.

Professional learning emerged as most effective when it was sustained, practice-embedded, and directly connected to classroom decision-making. Teachers expressed a clear preference for mentorship and coaching over one-off workshops, reinforcing literature that emphasises iterative, contextually grounded professional development (Romijn et al., 2021; Rogahang et al., 2024).

At the same time, the absence of clear school-wide frameworks created variability in how CIP was interpreted and enacted. Where inclusive values were articulated but not operationalised, teachers were required to rely on individual judgement, leading to inconsistency across classrooms.

From an ecological perspective, institutional support operates across the mesosystem and exosystem, shaping whether inclusive intentions can be translated into sustained practice. When professional learning, collaboration, and policy alignment are coherent, teachers are better able to extend practice beyond surface-level adaptations towards deeper instructional and structural enactment.

Theoretical Contribution: Reframing Inclusion Ecologically

This study contributes to the literature by reframing culturally inclusive practice as an ecological phenomenon. Rather than locating inclusion within individual teacher competence, the findings demonstrate how practice is shaped through interactions across systems.

The concept of a commitment–capacity gap provides a useful analytical lens for understanding the discrepancy between inclusive intentions and enacted practice. This gap reflects the alignment, or misalignment, between teacher beliefs (microsystem), professional relationships and routines (mesosystem), and institutional conditions (exosystem).

In addition, the study differentiates between dimensions of teacher understanding (declarative, applied, reflective) and levels of enactment (surface, instructional, structural), offering a more granular framework for analysing inclusive practice. Together, these contributions extend the application of ecological systems theory to inclusion in international school contexts.

Practical Implications

This study suggests that strengthening culturally inclusive practice requires a shift from individual capacity-building to system-level alignment. While teachers demonstrate strong conceptual commitment, the findings indicate that consistent enactment depends on the conditions under which teaching is organised.

For school leadership, this highlights the importance of translating inclusive values into clear pedagogical expectations. The absence of coherent frameworks leaves inclusion open to individual interpretation, resulting in variability across classrooms. Establishing shared language, expectations, and exemplars can reduce this variability and support more consistent practice.

Professional learning design also emerges as a critical lever. The findings suggest that one-off workshops are insufficient to support sustained inclusive practice. Instead, teachers benefit from ongoing, practice-embedded support such as mentorship, coaching, and collaborative planning. These structures enable teachers to move beyond surface-level adaptations towards deeper instructional and assessment-level enactment.

At the classroom level, the findings reinforce the importance of collaborative professional culture. Opportunities for teachers to share strategies, resources, and reflective insights appear to support both confidence and implementation. Embedding such collaboration within routine practice, rather than leaving it to individual initiative, is likely to strengthen collective capacity.

Taken together, these implications reinforce the central argument of the study: culturally inclusive practice is most effectively developed not through isolated teacher effort, but through coherent alignment between beliefs, professional learning, and institutional structures.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study is geographically bounded, with participants drawn from international schools in Singapore and Malaysia. While these contexts are characterised by high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity, the findings may not be directly transferable to other international school settings with different structural or cultural conditions.

Second, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability or prevailing professional norms around inclusion. Although the mixed-methods design strengthens interpretive depth, the findings reflect teachers' perceptions and accounts rather than direct observation of classroom practice.

Third, the qualitative phase involved a small number of participants. While appropriate for an explanatory design, this limits the breadth of perspectives captured and the extent to which variation across contexts can be explored.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Cross-regional studies could examine how culturally inclusive practices are shaped under different institutional and policy conditions. Longitudinal research could explore how teachers' understanding and enactment of inclusion evolve over time, particularly in response to sustained professional learning. Classroom-based studies, including observation and artefact analysis, would provide deeper insight into how culturally inclusive practices are enacted in situ. Finally, extending the focus beyond teachers to include students, school leaders, and families would strengthen understanding of how inclusion is experienced and supported across the wider school ecology.

Conclusion

This study examined how teachers in international schools understand and enact culturally inclusive practices (CIP), the barriers they encounter, and the institutional conditions shaping their work. Across both quantitative and qualitative findings, a consistent pattern emerged: teachers demonstrate strong conceptual commitment to culturally inclusive practices, yet their capacity to enact these practices consistently remains uneven.

This commitment–capacity gap reflects not a lack of motivation, but the ecological conditions within which teaching is organised. While teachers exercise agency in adapting materials and classroom interactions, their capacity to enact deeper instructional and structural changes is shaped by time constraints, resource availability, assessment expectations, and the coherence of institutional support.

These findings lead to a clear integrative conclusion. Culturally inclusive practice is not an individual pedagogical choice, but a system-dependent endeavour shaped by alignment across ecological levels. Teacher commitment, while necessary, is insufficient in isolation. Sustained inclusion depends on the extent to which institutional structures, professional learning systems, and collaborative routines enable and normalise inclusive practice.

Reframing inclusion through an ecological lens shifts the focus from individual effort to system coherence. Inclusive practice is shaped not only within the classroom, but through interactions across professional relationships, leadership priorities, policy frameworks, and resourcing decisions. Teachers' agency remains central, but it is exercised within, and often constrained by, these intersecting systems.

Sustainable progress therefore depends less on exhorting teachers to do more and more on building the conditions that make inclusive practice possible, visible, and consistent. When professional learning is embedded, mentorship is sustained, expectations are clear, and institutional support is coherent, teachers are better positioned to translate inclusive values into everyday practice.

In this sense, culturally inclusive practice in international schools is best understood as a collective, systemically enabled endeavour, shifting the focus from individual compliance to shared responsibility, and from aspiration to sustained enactment.

References

Banks, J. A. (2015). *Cultural diversity and education (0 ed.)*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315622255>

Bennett, C. I. (2010). *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice (7th ed., international ed)*. Pearson.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

British Educational Research Association. (2018). *Ethical guidelines for educational research. (4th ed.)*. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Harvard University Press.

Bunnell, T. (2016). *Teachers in international schools: A global educational 'precariat'?* *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 14(4), 543–559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2015.1068163>

Civitillo, S., Juang, L. P., & Schachner, M. K. (2018). *Challenging beliefs about cultural diversity in education: A synthesis and critical review of trainings with pre-service teachers.* *Educational Research Review*, 24, 67–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.01.003>

Creswell, J.W. and Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches.* SAGE.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research.* SAGE.

Gay, G. (2013). *Teaching to and through cultural diversity.* *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 48–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002>

Glock, S., Kovacs, C., & Pit-ten Cate, I. (2019). *Teachers' attitudes towards ethnic minority students: Effects of schools' cultural diversity.* *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(4), 616–634. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12248>

Gonzalez, A., Christiaensen, L., & Robalino, D. (2019). *Migration and jobs: Issues for the 21st century.* World Bank, Washington, DC. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-8867>

Hayden, M. C., & Thompson, J. J. (2013). *International schools: Antecedents, current issues and metaphors for the future.* In R. Pearce (Ed.), *International education and schools: Moving beyond the first 40 years.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Heng, T. T., & Lim, L. (2021). *Diversity, difference, equity: How student differences are socially constructed in Singapore.* *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(6), 693–712. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1910204>

Holliday, A. (2011). *Intercultural communication and ideology.* SAGE.

International Baccalaureate Organization. (n.d.). *Mission and philosophy.* Retrieved from ibo.org

International Organization for Migration. (2024). *World migration report 2024.* United Nations.

Ivankova, N. V., Creswell, J. W., & Stick, S. L. (2006). *Using mixed-methods sequential explanatory design: From theory to practice.* *Field Methods*, 18(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05282260>

Knoblauch, C. (2023). *Cultural and religious diversity in early childhood education implications of socialization and education for the geographies of childhood.* *Religions*, 14(4), 555. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040555>

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). *Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy*. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: A.k.a. the Remix*. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751>

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1986). *But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation*. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, 1986(30), 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1427>

OECD. (2018). *Preparing our youth for an inclusive and sustainable world: The OECD PISA global competence framework*. <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-sub-issues/global-competence/Handbook-PISA-2018-Global-Competence.pdf>

Rogahang, S. S. N., Paramansyah, A., Zaelani, K., Iqbal, M., & Judijanto, L. (2024). *Inclusive education practices: Fostering diversity and equity in the classroom*. *Global International Journal of Innovative Research*, 1(3), 260–266. <https://doi.org/10.59613/global.v1i3.46>

Romijn, B. R., Slot, P. L., & Leseman, P. P. M. (2021). *Increasing teachers' intercultural competences in teacher preparation programs and through professional development: A review*. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 98, 103236. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103236>

Sleeter, C. E. (2001). *Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of whiteness*. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 94–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487101052002002>

Taber, K. S. (2018). *The use of cronbach's alpha when developing and reporting research instruments in science education*. *Research in Science Education*, 48(6), 1273–1296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-016-9602-2>

UNESCO. (2015). *Global citizenship education: Topics and learning objectives*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/DRHC3544>

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>