



Inclusive Education Competency Among Preschool Teachers: An Empirical Study of the Mediating Role of Self-Development

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has become a priority in early childhood education systems, as preschool classrooms have become increasingly diverse. Teachers are expected to demonstrate strong competencies in inclusive education. While previous research has emphasized the importance of teachers' inclusive education disposition and knowledge, empirical studies have not fully explored the mediating mechanisms through which these factors influence competency development. This study uses survey data from 770 in-service preschool teachers across 16 districts in Shanghai, China. This study examined the mediating role of self-development in the relationships among inclusive education disposition, knowledge, and competency. Structural equation modeling was employed to analyze direct and indirect effects. The results showed that inclusive education disposition and knowledge significantly predicted inclusive education competency, although their direct effects were relatively small ($\beta = 0.084$ and $\beta = 0.180$, respectively). More importantly, self-development, comprising self-planning, autonomous learning, and reflective practice, had the strongest effect on competency ($\beta = 0.684$) and significantly mediated these relationships, with indirect effects of $\beta = 0.289$ and $\beta = 0.312$, respectively. These findings highlight the importance of fostering continuous professional learning and reflective engagement among teachers to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education. The study offers practical insights for teacher education programs and professional

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development initiatives, particularly in urban contexts, and may inform other developing education systems seeking to strengthen early childhood education through teacher competency development.

Keywords : Preschool Teachers / Inclusive Education Competency / Self-development / Professional Development / PLS-SEM

Statement of the Problem

Inclusive education has become a central priority in contemporary educational reform, emphasizing equity, participation, and quality learning opportunities for all children. International policy frameworks have consistently advocated for inclusive systems that accommodate learner diversity within mainstream educational settings (UNESCO, 2023). In early childhood education, this issue is particularly critical, as preschool represents children's first formal learning environment and plays a foundational role in shaping later academic and social development. Given the wide variability in young children's developmental trajectories, implementing inclusive practices in early childhood settings is inherently complex (NAEYC, 2020). As classrooms become increasingly diverse, preschool teachers are expected to demonstrate strong inclusive education competencies.

However, existing research indicates that teachers are a key factor in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and instructional capabilities directly influence the enactment of inclusive principles in classroom practice (Sharma and Sokal, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Although teachers often report positive attitudes towards inclusion, many experience difficulties in translating these values into effective instructional strategies. This reflects a persistent gap between inclusive attitudes and actual classroom practices, particularly in early childhood settings where developmental diversity requires highly adaptive and responsive teaching.

Previous studies have identified inclusive education disposition and knowledge as important professional foundations. Disposition provides the motivational basis for inclusive practice, while knowledge offers the cognitive and pedagogical support necessary for instructional adaptation. However, the presence of these attributes alone does not guarantee effective inclusive practice. Empirical evidence suggests that teachers' beliefs and knowledge do not automatically translate into competency, indicating the need to examine the

processes through which professional attributes are enacted in practice (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2013; Sharma et al., 2018).

Recent research has increasingly emphasized professional development as a dynamic process that transforms professional qualities into practical competencies (Avalos, 2011). In this context, self-development—characterized by reflective practice, autonomous learning, and professional planning—may serve as a key mechanism through which teachers actively translate their disposition and knowledge into inclusive teaching practices. However, few studies have systematically examined this mediating mechanism, particularly in the context of early childhood education (Madina et al., 2022).

Moreover, this issue is especially relevant in rapidly developing urban education systems such as Shanghai, where educational expectations are high, resources are relatively abundant, and teachers face increasing demands for professional competence and continuous development. In such contexts, self-development may play a particularly important role in enabling teachers to adapt to diverse learner needs and translate professional attributes into effective practice.

Therefore, there is a need to investigate how inclusive education disposition and knowledge are translated into inclusive education competency through self-development. Addressing this gap is essential for developing effective teacher-education programs and professional-development strategies that support inclusive practices. This study aims to examine the mediating role of self-development in the relationship between inclusive education disposition, knowledge, and competency in preschool teachers.

Objectives

1. To examine the direct effects of inclusive education disposition (IED) and inclusive education knowledge (IEK) on inclusive education competency (IEC) among preschool teachers.
2. To examine the effects of inclusive education disposition (IED) and inclusive education knowledge (IEK) on teachers' self-development (SD).
3. To examine the effect of self-development (SD) on inclusive education competency (IEC).
4. To examine the mediating effect of self-development (SD) in the relationship between inclusive education disposition (IED) and inclusive education competency (IEC).

5. To examine the mediating effect of self-development (SD) in the relationship between inclusive education knowledge (IEK) and inclusive education competency (IEC).

Research Hypotheses

H1: Inclusive education disposition (IED) positively predicts inclusive education competency (IEC).

H2: Inclusive education knowledge (IEK) positively predicts inclusive education competency (IEC).

H3: Inclusive education disposition (IED) positively predicts self-development (SD).

H4: Inclusive education knowledge (IEK) positively predicts self-development (SD).

H5: Self-development (SD) positively predicts inclusive education competency (IEC).

H6: Self-development (SD) mediates the relationship between inclusive education disposition (IED) and inclusive education competency (IEC).

H7: Self-development (SD) mediates the relationship between inclusive education knowledge (IEK) and inclusive education competency (IEC).

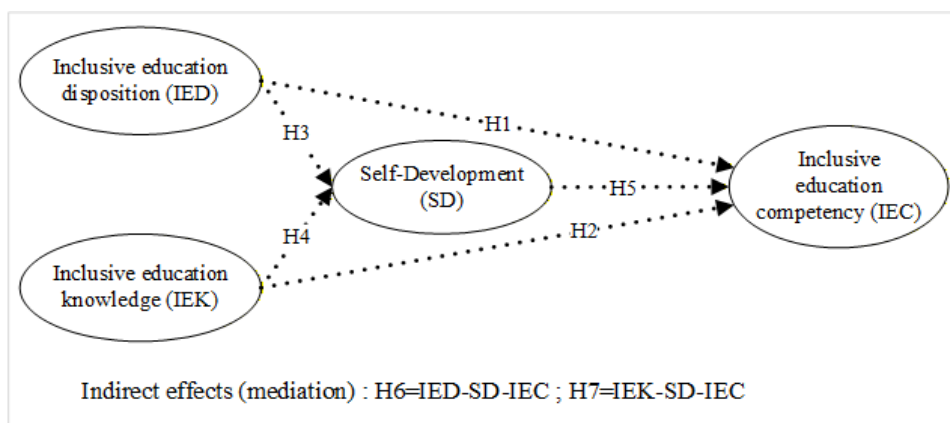


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationships among inclusive education disposition (IED), inclusive education knowledge (IEK), self-development (SD), and inclusive education competency (IEC) among preschool teachers.

The research framework includes both direct and indirect pathways, investigating the direct influence of IED and IEK on IEC, as well as the mediating role of SD in these relationships.

To test the proposed hypotheses, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0. PLS-SEM is suitable for mediation analysis and is particularly effective for models with multiple latent constructs, as it does not require strict assumptions of multivariate normality. The analysis proceeded in two stages: first, assessing the measurement model, followed by the assessment of the structural model. All constructs were specified as reflective.

2. Population and Sample

The study sample consisted of 770 in-service preschool teachers from public and private kindergartens across 16 administrative districts in Shanghai, China. The total population of preschool teachers in the selected districts was 43,369.

Proportionate stratified sampling was employed, with strata defined by administrative districts and school types (public and private kindergartens). The number of participants selected from each stratum was proportionally determined based on the distribution of the population across districts and school types, ensuring representative coverage of the target population.

The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula, which indicated that a minimum of 770 responses was necessary to achieve reliable statistical results. To ensure adequate statistical power, 900 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 800 responses. After data screening, including the removal of incomplete and invalid responses, 770 valid responses were retained. This sample size meets the recommended thresholds for PLS-SEM and mediation analysis.

3. Data Collection Instrumentation

All constructs were measured using structured questionnaires adapted from well-established scales and tailored to the early childhood inclusive education context. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The constructs measured included the following:

Inclusive Education Disposition (IED): nine items assessing teachers' value beliefs, professional attitudes, and ethical commitment (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2013).

Inclusive Education Knowledge (IEK): twelve items evaluating knowledge related to child development, inclusive teaching strategies, and intervention methods (Wang et al., 2025).

Self-Development (SD): ten items measuring self-planning, autonomous learning, and reflective practice (Madina et al., 2022).

Inclusive Education Competency (IEC): fifteen items assessing instructional adaptation, behavior management, inclusive classroom climate, and collaboration (Sharma and Sokal, 2016).

The questionnaire items were adapted to fit the early childhood education context. To ensure content validity, the instrument was evaluated by experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC), with an average value of 0.934, indicating that all items were appropriate and relevant.

Based on expert feedback, minor revisions were made to improve item clarity. The revised instrument was then pilot-tested with 120 preschool teachers to ensure clarity and suitability for the target population. No major revisions were required, and the final instrument was used for data collection.

Table 1 Constructs, dimensions, and measurement items

Construct	Dimensions / Subscales	Items	Source / Adaptation
Inclusive Education Disposition (IED)	Value beliefs; professional attitudes; ethical commitment	9	Florian and Black-Hawkins (2013)
Inclusive Education Knowledge (IEK)	Basic knowledge; child development; intervention knowledge	12	Wang et al. (2025)
Self-Development (SD)	Self-planning; autonomous learning; reflective practice	10	Madina et al. (2022)
Inclusive Education Competency (IEC)	Instructional adaptation; behavior management; inclusive climate; collaboration	15	Sharma and Sokal (2016)

4. Data Collection Process

Data were collected through an online survey distributed between November and December 2025. School administrators facilitated the distribution of the survey to ensure wide participation. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided written informed consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

The returned questionnaires were thoroughly screened for missing data, response patterns, and completion times to ensure the validity of the datasets. Only fully completed and valid responses were included in the final dataset.

5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 24.0 and SmartPLS 4. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were conducted as preliminary analyses. To test the hypothesized relationships, PLS-SEM was applied to evaluate both the measurement and structural models.

The reliability and validity of the constructs were assessed using the following criteria: Item loadings ($> .70$), composite reliability ($> .70$), Average Variance Extracted (AVE $> .50$), Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio ($< .90$), and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF).

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was performed to test the significance of path coefficients and mediation effects. Path coefficients, R^2 values, confidence intervals, and effect sizes (f^2) were examined. Mediation effects were considered significant if the indirect effects were statistically supported and the confidence intervals excluded zeros.

6. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Payap University (COA No. 68017, PYU_REC No. 68010). All participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, any potential risks, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. The data were stored securely, and no personally identifiable information was collected or reported in this study.

Conclusions

1. Sample Characteristics

A total of 770 in-service preschool teachers participated in this study. The majority of participants were aged between 20 and 40 years (80.0%) and were predominantly female

(95.8%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (90.9%) and worked as frontline teachers (83.8%).

Regarding professional experience, a substantial proportion of teachers (78.2%) reported prior contact with children with special educational needs (SEN). However, only 23.1% had received formal training in inclusive education. This disparity indicates a notable gap between practical exposure and systematic professional preparation in inclusive education.

Descriptive statistics for the main variables are presented in Table 2. Overall, teachers reported relatively high levels across all constructs. The mean scores were 41.49 (SD = 4.85) for inclusive education disposition (IED), 44.78 (SD = 10.35) for inclusive education knowledge (IEK), 42.06 (SD = 7.11) for self-development (SD), and 62.74 (SD = 10.76) for inclusive education competency (IEC).

In addition, the skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within acceptable ranges (see Table 2), indicating no significant deviation from normality.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 770)

Variable	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
IED	24.00	45.00	41.49	4.85	-1.45	1.25
IEK	12.00	60.00	44.78	10.35	-0.51	-0.20
IEC	25.00	75.00	62.74	10.76	-0.69	-0.32
SD	17.00	50.00	42.06	7.11	-0.68	-0.39

2. Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

First, reliability and convergent validity were assessed. As shown in Table 3, all the constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.933 to 0.970, and composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.934 to 0.970, both exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity was also supported, with average variance extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.652 to 0.717, all above the acceptable level of 0.50.

Second, discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As presented in Table 4, the square roots of the AVE for all constructs were greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Furthermore, the HTMT values (see Table 5) ranged from 0.458 to 0.890, remaining below the conservative threshold of 0.90, which further confirms the discriminant validity.

Overall, these results indicate that the four constructs—IED, IEK, SD, and IEC—demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, and were suitable for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 3 Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
IED	0.933	0.934	0.652
IEK	0.964	0.965	0.717
SD	0.951	0.951	0.693
IEC	0.970	0.970	0.702

Note: Acceptable thresholds: $\alpha \geq 0.70$, CR ≥ 0.70 , AVE ≥ 0.50 .

Table 4 Discriminant Validity Results (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	IED	IEK	SD	IEC
IED	0.919	—	—	—
IEK	0.436	0.938	—	—
SD	0.621	0.639	0.933	—
IEC	0.587	0.654	0.852	0.912

Note: The diagonal values represent the square root of the AVE. The off-diagonal values represent the inter-construct correlations. Discriminant validity is supported when each diagonal value exceeds its corresponding correlation.

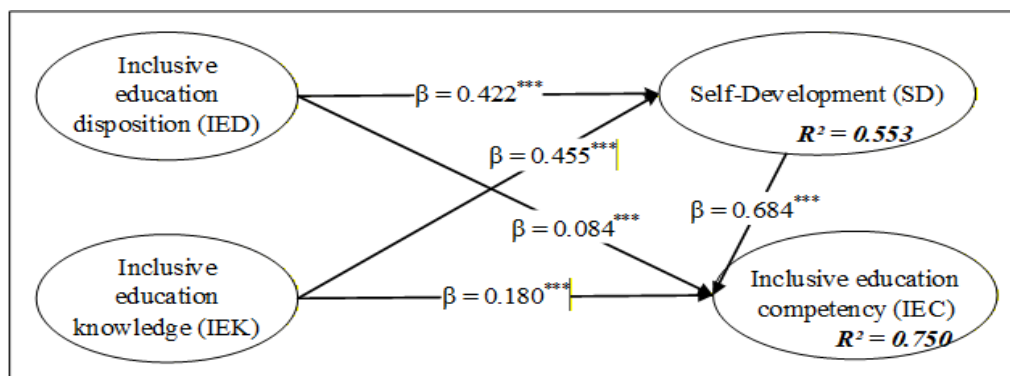
Table 5 Discriminant Validity Results (HTMT Criterion)

Construct	IED	IEK	SD	IEC
IED	—			
IEK	0.458	—		
SD	0.656	0.665	—	
IEC	0.618	0.675	0.890	—

Note: HTMT values below 0.90 are considered acceptable in social science research.

3. Structural Model

The structural model was evaluated in terms of collinearity, model fit, path coefficients, effect sizes, explanatory power, and mediation effects. Collinearity diagnostics indicated no multicollinearity concerns ($VIF = 1.23\text{--}2.24$), and The model fit was acceptable ($SRMR = 0.043$). The structural model is illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2** Structural model with the path coefficients.

The results (Table 6) show that all the hypothesized paths were significant. IED ($\beta = 0.422$, $p < .001$) and IEK ($\beta = 0.455$, $p < .001$) significant predictors of SD. SD had the strongest effect on IEC ($\beta = 0.684$, $p < .001$), whereas IEK ($\beta = 0.180$, $p < .001$) and IED ($\beta = 0.084$, $p < .001$) had smaller direct effects.

Effect size analysis (Table 6) indicated that SD had a large effect on IEC ($f^2 = 0.838$), whereas IED ($f^2 = 0.017$) and IEK ($f^2 = 0.077$) had small effects. Both IED ($f^2 = 0.323$) and IEK ($f^2 = 0.375$) had medium effects on SD. The model explained 75.0% of the variance in IEC ($R^2 = 0.750$) and 55.3% of the variance in SD ($R^2 = 0.553$) (Table 7).

Table 6 Structural Model Path Coefficients (Bootstrapping, 5,000 Resamples) and Effect Sizes

Path	β	t	p	95% CI (Bias-Corrected)	f ²	Interpretation
IED → IEC	0.084	3.458	< .001	[0.043, 0.124]	0.017	Small
IEK → IEC	0.180	6.207	< .001	[0.132, 0.227]	0.077	Small
SD → IEC	0.684	24.526	< .001	[0.639, 0.730]	0.838	Large
IED → SD	0.422	14.466	< .001	[0.374, 0.469]	0.323	Medium
IEK → SD	0.455	16.319	< .001	[0.409, 0.501]	0.375	Medium

Note: β = standardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval. Significant when CI excludes zero. Effect sizes followed Cohen (1988): 0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large.

Table 7 Coefficient of Determination (R²)

Endogenous Construct	R ²
IEC	0.750
SD	0.553

Note: R² values of 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75 are considered weak, moderate, and substantial levels of predictive accuracy, respectively (Hair et al., 2022)

Mediation analysis (Table 8) showed that SD significantly mediated the relationship between IED and IEC (β = 0.289, p < .001) and between IEK and IEC (β = 0.312, p < .001). In both cases, the indirect effects were larger than the direct effects, indicating partial mediation.

Table 8 Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects (Bootstrapping 5,000)

Path	Direct Effect (β)	Indirect Effect (β)	95% CI (Indirect)	p-value	Total Effect (β)
IED → IEC	0.084	0.289	[0.253, 0.328]	0.000	0.373
IEK → IEC	0.180	0.312	[0.273, 0.351]	0.000	0.492
IED → SD	0.422	—	—	0.000	0.422
IEK → SD	0.455	—	—	0.000	0.455
SD → IEC	0.684	—	—	0.000	0.684

Discussion

1. Summary of Key Findings

This study examined the relationships in inclusive education disposition (IED), inclusive education knowledge (IEK), self-development (SD), and inclusive education competency (IEC) among preschool teachers. The results indicate that both IED and IEK significantly influence IEC, with SD playing a crucial mediating role. Among all variables, SD was as the strongest predictor of IEC, highlighting its central role in transforming professional attributes into effective inclusive teaching practices.

2. Discussion of Key Relationships

The findings confirm that inclusive education disposition (IED) and knowledge (IEK) have significant positive effects on inclusive education competency (IEC). This is consistent with previous studies suggesting that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and professional knowledge form the foundation for inclusive practice (Sharma and Sokal, 2016; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2013). Teachers with stronger inclusive values are more likely to adopt equitable teaching approaches, whereas those with greater professional knowledge are better equipped to implement differentiated instruction.

However, the results further reveal that these effects are not primarily direct. Instead, self-development (SD) functions as a key mechanism through which IED and IEK are translated into competencies. This finding helps explain the commonly observed gap between teachers' positive attitudes and their actual classroom practices, which has been widely reported in inclusive education research (Loreman et al., 2014; Schwab, 2017). In the present study, although a large proportion of teachers (78.2%) reported prior contact with children with special educational needs, only 23.1% had received formal training in inclusive education. This discrepancy suggests that practical exposure alone is insufficient to ensure competency development and highlights the importance of structured professional learning processes.

In addition, the strong effect of SD on IEC indicates that inclusive education competency should be understood as a dynamic developmental outcome rather than a static attribute. This finding aligns with research emphasizing that teacher competence develops through ongoing professional learning and reflective practice (Avalos, 2011). Self-development operates as a transformation mechanism through which teachers actively convert their beliefs and knowledge into instructional practices (Madina et al., 2022). Through reflective practice,

autonomous learning, and professional planning, teachers continuously refine their instructional strategies and enhance their ability to respond to diverse student needs.

Furthermore, the significant mediating effects of SD confirm that both IED and IEK indirectly influence IEC through ongoing professional development. While IED provides motivational direction and ethical commitment, and IEK offers pedagogical resources, their effectiveness depends on teachers' active engagement in self-development. Without such engagement, professional attributes may remain at the level of intention rather than being translated into practice.

3. Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practices and policies. First, improving inclusive education competency requires more than increasing the number of training programs. Instead, it is necessary to establish sustainable professional learning systems that support teachers' continuous development.

Educational institutions and policymakers should promote structured reflective practices, mentoring systems, and collaborative learning communities. These approaches can help teachers transform their knowledge and beliefs into effective instructional practices. In addition, more structured and continuous professional development models, such as micro-credential programs, reflective supervision, and competency-based training systems, may be considered to strengthen teachers' ongoing learning processes.

In addition, targeted support mechanisms should be developed to facilitate teachers' self-development, including opportunities for professional planning, peer learning, and ongoing feedback. Such strategies are particularly important in rapidly developing urban education systems, such as Shanghai, where high educational expectations and increasing classroom diversity place greater demands on teachers' professional competence and continuous development.

4. Limitations and Future Research

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of self-reported data may have introduced response bias. Future studies could incorporate multiple data sources, such as classroom observations or peer evaluations, to enhance validity.

Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to make causal inferences. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how professional attributes and self-development evolve.

Third, the study was conducted in a metropolitan context, which may limit the generalizability of its findings. Future research should examine different regional and cultural contexts to validate the model.

Finally, future studies should incorporate organizational-level variables, such as school climate and leadership support, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive teacher development.

Suggestions

Recommendations for Application of Research Findings

Based on the findings of this study, several practical suggestions are proposed.

First, educational authorities should move beyond short-term training programs and establish sustainable professional development systems that support teachers' continuous self-development. Policies should emphasize reflective practice, long-term professional planning, and autonomous learning as core components of teacher development. More structured approaches, such as competency-based training frameworks and micro-credential systems, may help ensure continuous and measurable professional growth.

Second, schools should create structured support environments to facilitate teachers' self-development. This may include the establishment of mentoring systems, peer observation mechanisms, and collaborative learning communities, which can help teachers translate their knowledge and beliefs into effective inclusive practices. In addition, reflective supervision practices, such as guided reflection sessions and coaching feedback, can further support teachers in translating their knowledge and beliefs into effective, inclusive practices.

Third, teacher education programs should integrate the development of inclusive education disposition, knowledge, and self-development capacities. Pre-service and in-service training should not only focus on knowledge acquisition but also promote reflective skills and self-directed learning. Special attention should be given to addressing the gap between teachers' practical exposure to inclusive settings and their limited access to formal training, as identified in this study.

Finally, targeted support should be provided to teachers with limited experience in inclusive education. Tailored training programs and ongoing professional guidance can help reduce the gap between teachers' attitudes and their actual instructional practices. Policy-

level support, such as linking professional development to teacher evaluation or certification renewal, may further strengthen engagement in continuous self-development.

Suggestions for Future Research

Several directions for future research are suggested.

First, future studies should adopt longitudinal research designs to examine how inclusive education dispositions, knowledge, and self-development evolve over time and influence competency development.

Second, researchers should use multiple data sources, such as classroom observations, interviews, and peer evaluations, to reduce the limitations associated with self-reported data.

Third, future research should extend the current model by incorporating organizational-level variables, such as school leadership, institutional support, and school climate, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education competency development.

Finally, comparative studies across different regions or countries are recommended to examine the generalizability of the findings and to explore how cultural and contextual factors influence inclusive education practices.

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