

Inside or Outside the Domain: Homeroom Teachers' Professional Identity and the Implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Inclusive Classrooms

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the professional identity and pedagogical efficacy of general education homeroom teachers navigating inclusive education through the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Utilizing a mixed-methods concurrent triangulation design, data were collected from a quantitative sample of general education teachers via structured surveys and a qualitative cohort of homeroom educators via semi-structured depth interviews. The results reveal a striking "Efficacy-Practice Paradox": while educators exhibit highly favorable ethical attitudes toward the overarching philosophy of inclusion, their subjective self-efficacy regarding the practical implementation of accessibility remains critically low. Crucially, despite this structural anxiety, their operational execution of UDL diversification strategies in the classroom is remarkably high. Multiple linear regressions demonstrate that moral and ideological commitment to social equity serves as the primary predictor of instructional diversification, whereas formal technical self-efficacy holds no predictive validity. Qualitative analysis underscores how educators construct a hybrid psycho-pedagogical identity, dynamically utilizing digital tools and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to cultivate classroom equity and bypass student barriers. The study highlights that inclusive teacher identity is constructed "bottom-up" through ethical imperatives rather than technical confidence, and underscores why homeroom teachers experience significantly greater structural burnout due to frontline containment demands. Ultimately, the paper calls for a systemic shift from brief theoretical training toward sustained, in-situ clinical mentoring.

Keywords: Teacher Professional Identity; Universal Design for Learning (UDL); Inclusive Education; Teacher Self-Efficacy; Educational Equity; Educational Technology.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a paramount global and local policy objective, fundamentally restructuring general education environments to accommodate students with special educational needs (SEN). In Israel, this global trajectory was formalized through Amendment 11 to the

Special Education Law (2018), which legally anchored the right of students with special needs to equitable, active participation within regular school frameworks. By substituting the segregated construct of "special education" with "special education services," the legislature

redefined special education as a portable, qualitative service wrapped around the student rather than a rigid physical placement.

In practice, the operational execution of this inclusive mandate heavily depends on general education homeroom teachers, who find themselves on the front lines of managing highly heterogeneous classrooms. Homeroom educators function as primary agents balancing standardized academic performance metrics against the intense emotional, behavioral, and social demands of integrated students. National evaluation reports (e.g., RAMA, 2023) indicate that fewer than 20% of general educators believe they receive sufficient training or tools to address these complex classroom dynamics, resulting in widespread occupational stress and pedagogical helplessness.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is increasingly championed as a systemic framework to alleviate this structural duress. By guiding teachers to design flexible learning environments proactively, UDL offers clear mechanisms to diversify representation, action and expression, and engagement. While UDL gains theoretical traction, empirical local literature exploring how the framework shapes the professional identity and inner efficacy of general homeroom educators remains sparse. This study explicitly explores the professional identity of educators navigating UDL, evaluates the relationship between ethical attitudes and practical implementation, and maps the systemic barriers hampering inclusive frameworks in Israel.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Professional Identity of Homeroom Teachers and the Inclusive Mandate

Teacher professional identity is not a static construct but a dynamic, evolutionary process shaped by the continuous negotiation between an individual's core moral beliefs, subjective experiences, and the shifting structural demands of the institution. In the wake of major global and national inclusion mandates, the professional identity of general education

homeroom teachers is undergoing a profound and highly contested transformation (Ainscow, 2020a). Teachers are being systematically

pressured to expand their traditional vocational boundaries—transitioning from disciplinary, frontal, and uniform instructional delivery toward a broader, more holistic form of classroom leadership capable of managing high cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral variance (Cole-Runswick, 2011). This shift challenges the very core of teacher identity, as educators must reconcile their traditional role as macro-managers of standardized academic progress with the new micro-demands of localized clinical and emotional containment.

Educational and sociological literature suggests that this inclusive landscape is currently being renegotiated under the heavy influence of a broader "therapeutic discourse" and the medicalization of education (Bergey, 2024; Conrad, 2007; Ecclestone, 2017). The exponential increase in student diagnoses—ranging from complex learning disabilities to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and acute Emotional-Behavioral Disorders (EBD)—has infused general schools with a clinical and biomedical vocabulary (Rafalovich, 2005; Simoni, 2018). Rather than viewing diversity as a natural socio-cultural variation, the medicalized educational paradigm frequently re-prioritizes the homeroom teacher's role, shifting their primary professional focal point from academic instruction to intense emotional regulation, behavioral containment, and psychiatric compliance tracking (Amrami-Plotkin & Segal, 2024). Consequently, teachers must adopt hybrid, psycho-pedagogical professional identities for which they feel structurally and emotionally ill-prepared.

Furthermore, critical analysis indicates a deep conceptual dissonance in the field. While general education teachers readily embrace the long-standing term integration as a clear, unassailable moral good associated with equal opportunity and societal tolerance, *inclusion* is often perceived as an entirely different, highly problematic mandate (Gidlund, 2018). Under the pressure of a neoliberal educational culture, teachers are caught in an operational vice: they are held rigidly accountable for their classroom's standardized test metrics while being demanded to fully "absorb" and "contain" disruptive behaviors that fracture instructional time (Cole-Runswick,

2011). Because the systemic policy of inclusion often manifests as an ideological rhetoric stripped of material resources, homeroom teachers frequently interpret "inclusion" not as a progressive pedagogy, but as an institutional demand for limitless, borderless emotional labor, leading to a pervasive sense of professional isolation, institutional vulnerability, and rapid burnout (Alharbi & Iqtadar, 2024).

2.2 Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Digital/AI Pedagogical Agency

To ground the abstract, often frustratingly amorphous ideals of inclusion within a tangible, structural reality, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides an operational framework that actively restores an educator's proactive pedagogical agency. Developed by David Rose and the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), UDL structurally shifts the educational narrative away from a deficit-based model. Traditional integration models rely on "retrofitting" lessons—modifying an existing, rigid curriculum for a specific student with special needs after the lesson has already failed them. This retroactive adjustment not only imposes an unsustainable preparatory burden on the teacher, but also inadvertently reinforces the deficit-tracking and social stigma of the student within the peer group (Pisha & Coyne, 2001).

In contrast, UDL operates on the architectural premise that variance is a natural, predictable, and permanent feature of any human population. Therefore, learning environments must be designed from their inception to anticipate this variance without requiring individual segregation (Rose, 2000). Built upon the mapping of three primary, interconnected neural networks—the recognition network ("the what" of learning), the strategic network ("the how" of learning), and the affective network ("the why" of learning)—UDL guides

educators through a matrix of three core principles (CAST, 2024):

1. **Multiple Means of Representation:** Presenting information through multiple sensory modalities (e.g., visual graphics, auditory narration, simplified text, tactile modeling) to eliminate perceptual barriers.

2. **Multiple Means of Action and Expression:** Providing students with varied, flexible alternatives to demonstrate their mastery of content, thereby bypassing motor, executive, or graphomotor deficits.
3. **Multiple Means of Engagement:** Leveraging student autonomy, gamification, and culturally relevant problem-based learning (PBL) to recruit interest and sustain motivation

In contemporary digital spaces, the intersection of UDL guidelines with artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging educational technologies has fundamentally amplified teachers' pedagogical agency (Saborío-Taylor & Rojas-Ramírez, 2024). Historically, the primary barrier to the widespread execution of highly differentiated, inclusive frameworks has been the tyrannical constraint of time; teachers simply could not manually author multiple separate versions of a single text or artifact for a thirty-student classroom.

Generative AI and automated adaptive learning platforms have largely dismantled this material barrier. By executing real-time, algorithmic text-to-speech conversions, linguistic simplification, semantic tier-shifting, and instant multimodal content generation, digital tools provide an immediate translation of UDL theory into classroom practice. Consequently, the technology acts as an exogenous amplifier of the teacher's agency. Rather than functioning as a passive transmitter of a standardized, unyielding curriculum, the homeroom teacher is emancipated to become an intentional, equity-driven architect of an autonomous learning ecosystem (Saborío-Taylor & Rojas-Ramírez, 2024; Song et al., 2024).

Rooted in Albert Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1977, 1997), teacher self-efficacy is defined as an educator's subjective belief in their own capability to organize, sequence, and execute the specific courses of action required to successfully attain desired instructional outcomes. Within the domain of special and inclusive education, teacher efficacy is documented as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing efficacy in instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement

(Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Traditional linear models of inclusive education heavily position technical self-efficacy as the primary, indispensable psychological gatekeeper for the implementation of adaptive, non-traditional frameworks (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2021a; Sharma et al., 2012). The standard theoretical assumption follows that low self-efficacy inevitably triggers instructional paralysis, causing teachers to retreat to safe, rigid, and exclusionary frontal teaching methods when confronted with acute cognitive or behavioral variance (Kiel et al., 2020).

Howbeit, this linear efficacy-to-practice model assumes an ideal educational ecosystem where teacher beliefs are the primary variable. In reality, general education teachers operate within highly constrained, historically under-resourced structural environments. They must manage high student-to-teacher ratios, unyielding physical layouts, strict standardized testing timetables, and a severe absence of localized clinical mentoring or immediate behavioral support (Desombre et al., 2019). Under such structural duress, a teacher's low self-efficacy score may not represent an internal psychological deficit, but rather a completely accurate, highly rational cognitive appraisal of institutional deficits.

This study explicitly seeks to challenge the absolute necessity of the linear efficacy-to-practice model in inclusive settings. We hypothesize the existence of an alternative, overriding psychological mechanism: ideological and value-driven commitment to social equity. When a homeroom teacher's professional identity is deeply anchored in an ethical paradigm of social justice and humanistic equity, this moral imperative can function as a primary operational driver. In essence, a sufficiently powerful ideological commitment can compel an educator to push past their own subjective sense of technical inadequacy and structural anxiety, driving them to diversify their practice and implement complex UDL frameworks despite feeling clinically unequipped (Ainscow, 2020b).

The study focuses on a group of educators who share a substantive, although not uniform, connection to the role of the homeroom teacher. Most participants were serving as homeroom teachers at the time of the study, while others

had previously held the role or were engaged in educational work without formally occupying the position. This shared engagement with educational practice provides a common professional context through which participants negotiate meanings of inclusion, teacher responsibility, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

By examining how these educators negotiate inclusion and UDL within their professional identities, this study seeks to reconceptualize the relationship between teacher beliefs, professional agency, systemic constraints, and the enactment of educational equity in practice.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods concurrent triangulation design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously to capture statistical trends across the population while parsing out the experiential, identity-shaping realities of educators in the field.

3.1.1 Participants

- **Quantitative Sample:** Consisted of general education educators ($N=166$) teaching across elementary (48.4%), middle school (28.3%), and high school (9.0%) frameworks. Within the sample, 63.1% functioned strictly as homeroom teachers, 66.3% held a master's degree or higher, and 66.9% reported prior training or background in special education.
- **Qualitative Sample:** Comprised a nested cohort of homeroom educators and inclusion coordinators ($N=15$, 100% female) who had comprehensive training and practical exposure to the UDL framework.

3.1.2 Instruments

1. **Quantitative Survey:** A structured online questionnaire composed of three instruments: (a) Demographic and background matrix; (b) Inclusion and Accessibility Attitudes Scale (10 items, 6-point Likert scale, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$), measuring ideological views, institutional perceptions, and perceived self-

efficacy); (c) UDL Instructional Practices Diversification Scale (11 items, 6-point Likert scale, $\alpha = 0.90$), mapping multiple means of representation, expression, engagement, and assessment).

2. **Qualitative Interview Guide:** A semi-structured phenomenological depth interview guide designed to elicit narratives regarding definitions of accessibility, practical digital/AI executions, professional identity adaptations, perceived systemic bottlenecks, and emotional resilience.

3.2 Data Analysis

Quantitative datasets were analyzed via SPSS v27.0 using one-sample t -tests against the scale midpoint (3.5), Pearson correlations,

one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and multiple linear regression models. Qualitative transcripts were subjected to rigorous interpretative thematic content analysis to induce structural themes and sub-categories. Institutional Review Board (IRB) ethical approval was obtained (Protocol No. 2024061601).

4. Findings

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 The Efficacy-Practice Paradox

To measure educators' foundational perspectives, one-sample t -tests compared sub-scale scores against the neutral baseline (3.5). The metrics revealed a profound internal fracture within teachers' professional self-appraisals (Table 1).

Table 1: One-Sample t -Tests for Teacher Attitudes and Perceived Self-Efficacy ($N=166$)

Measure	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	t -value	Significance (p)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Foundational Perceptions of Inclusion	4.32	1.15	9.17	<.001	0.71 (Medium-High)
Perceptions of Accessibility Systemics	3.62	1.21	1.28	0.202	0.10 (Negligible)
Subjective Self-Efficacy for Practice	2.39	0.96	-15.01	<.001	-1.16 (Very Large, Negative)
Composite Attitude Metric	3.6	0.82	1.55	0.124	0.12 (Neutral)

The dataset reveals that while teachers hold strong, statistically significant moral support for the core philosophy of inclusion ($M=4.32$), their perceived self-efficacy to execute physical or pedagogical accessibility within their classrooms is critically low ($M=2.39$, $p < .001$), generating an exceptionally high negative effect

size ($d=-1.16$).

Concurrently, despite this severe lack of technical confidence, one-sample t -tests regarding objective implementation behavior revealed that educators reported remarkably high frequencies of actual UDL practice execution across all four structural pillars (Table 2).

Table 2: One-Sample t -Tests for Self-Reported UDL Practice Diversification ($N=166$)

UDL Sub-Scale Pillar	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	t -value	Significance (p)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Multiple Means of Representation	4.71	0.95	16.39	<.001	1.27 (Very Large)
Multiple Means of Student Expression	4.75	1.07	15.08	<.001	1.17 (Very Large)

Multiple Means of Engagement	4.51	1.16	11.21	<.001	0.87 (Large)
Diversified Feedback and Assessment	4.59	1.12	12.39	<.001	0.97 (Very Large)
Composite UDL Diversification Index	4.64	0.94	15.68	<.001	1.22 (Very Large)

This introduces the defining statistical paradox of the study: teachers are consistently and actively executing an array of highly hued UDL strategies ($M=4.64$), completely subverting their own psychological perception of low systemic capability.

4.1.2 Multiple Regression: Deconstructing Drivers of Practice

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression Model Predicting Composite UDL Diversification

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized B	Standard Error (SE)	Standardized β	t -value	Significance (p)
Constant	3.16	0.32	-	9.93	<.001
Foundational Perceptions of Inclusion	0.26	0.06	0.32	4.14	<.001
Perceptions of Accessibility Systemics	0.15	0.07	0.19	2.24	0.027
Subjective Self-Efficacy for Practice	-0.07	0.09	-0.07	-0.79	0.428
Model Fit Statistics ($R^2 = .132$, $F(3,162) = 8.19$, $p < .001$)					

The regression parameters provide a substantial theoretical shift: an educator's ethical, value-driven stance toward inclusion is the strongest, highly significant predictor of actual classroom UDL execution ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$). Crucially, a teacher's formal sense of technical self-efficacy exhibits zero predictive validity over their literal classroom behavior ($p = .428$).

4.2 Role-Based Variance and Educator Burnout

A one-way ANOVA tracking the background variable "Professional Role" revealed highly significant institutional fractures:

- **Ideological Erosion:** Homeroom teachers displayed significantly less optimistic attitudes toward inclusion mandates ($M=4.07$) relative to peripheral school coordinators and general principals

To evaluate the predictive mechanisms driving actual classroom diversification, a multiple linear regression model was constructed using the three attitude sub-scales as independent variables and the Composite UDL Diversification Index as the dependent variable (Table 3).

($M=4.59$, $F(2,163)=3.99$, $p < .05$).

- **Pillar Execution:** Homeroom teachers reported significantly superior execution scores regarding Multiple Means of Engagement compared to subject-matter teachers ($M_{\text{homeroom}}=4.67$) vs. ($M_{\text{subject}}=4.07$, $p < .05$).

5. Qualitative Results

The thematic analysis of the depth transcripts induced four foundational dimensions charting the experiential reality of the homeroom educators.

5.1 Professional Identity Restructuring: Inclusion as Equity

The educators conceptualized inclusion not as a regulatory checklist but as a profound moral mandate, directly defining accessibility through

the lens of equity over mechanical equality. Orly (Homeroom Teacher & Inclusion Coordinator) articulated this structural shift using a vivid culinary metaphor:

"I interpret the word accessibility as 'serving.' When you serve a meal, you don't just throw uniform food onto identical plates. You intentionally customize the dish—if a guest is celiac, you serve gluten-free; if lactose intolerant, dairy-free. Yet, everyone sits together at the exact same table, eating in absolute dignity. That is my instructional philosophy. Every child receives what they structurally need, but they remain seated at the shared table of general education."

5.2 The Digital Frontier: AI and Multimodal Pedagogical Agency

The transcripts detailed an organic orchestration of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence to construct borderless instruction:

- **Representation Scaffolds:** Adina detailed leveraging generative AI for real-time concept mapping: *"We were studying tourism, an abstract concept for some. I had each student input their raw ideas into AI to instantly generate visual worlds of what 'leisure' looked like... the abstract became hyper-tactile."*
- **Expression Scaffolds:** Homeroom teachers systematically circumvented fine-motor and dysgraphia barriers through multimedia content tools. Classrooms routinely utilized Stop Motion animation and digital audio podcasts to allow non-verbal or orthographically challenged students to demonstrate masteries: *"A child who could not physically sequence words on paper recorded an incredibly textured audio narrative using clay models. UDL unlocked a talent that standard testing would have erased"* (Lihi).

5.3 Authentic and Continuous Assessment

Educators detailed a rejection of traditional, high-stakes summative testing in favor of continuous, micro-evaluations. Transcripts profiled the routine implementation of digital "exit and entrance tickets" via Google Forms to parse class comprehension data silently. Teachers orchestrated subtle "workaround assessments," such as vocal audio recordings or downscaled

task quantities, ensuring equity: *"I read exam questions aloud to the entire collective class under the guise of proofreading for printing errors... it silently strips away the reading barrier for the dyslexic child without pathologizing him in front of his peers"* (Adina).

5.4 Deconstructing the Paradox: Intuitive Pedagogy vs. Systemic Bottlenecks

The qualitative analysis seamlessly resolves the quantitative paradox. The low self-efficacy reported by teachers does not mean an internal lack of capability, but rather a hyper-realistic appraisal of systemic deficits. Educators voiced deep frustration regarding unyielding schedules, packed classrooms, and a total lack of localized, practical mentoring: *"The system throws beautiful words like 'containment' at us, but leaves us completely alone in a crowded room"* (Bina).

Remarkably, the transcripts showed that many educators were executing UDL guidelines intuitively and spontaneously out of raw relational devotion long before encountering the formal theory. Their true sense of efficacy is built "bottom-up"—not via external state workshops, but through the micro-victories of witnessing a previously excluded child successfully engage and smile.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Dismantling the Linear Efficacy Model

The empirical value of this study lies in its direct challenge to classical linear models that assume technical self-efficacy is the primary psychological driver of inclusive education (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2021a; Sharma et al., 2012). While standard social-cognitive theory claims that low efficacy scores lead to rigid, exclusionary instruction (Kiel et al., 2020), this data presents a completely different psychological pathway: the Efficacy-Practice Paradox. General homeroom educators demonstrate robust, highly diversified UDL implementation ($M=4.64$) despite holding an acute internal sense of technical inadequacy ($M=2.39$).

The regression parameters resolve this by demonstrating that ethical, rights-based commitment to social equity acts as the primary predictor of classroom implementation ($\beta = .32, p < .001$). When an educator's professional identity is deeply anchored in a moral imperative, this ethical alignment

effectively overrides their structural anxiety, driving them to find creative pedagogical solutions despite a perceived lack of systemic tools or confidence.

6.2 The Structural Burden on Homeroom Leaders

The role-based variance captured by the ANOVA models exposes a serious vulnerability within current inclusive school structures. Homeroom educators exhibit significantly lower optimism toward inclusion policy texts ($M=4.07$) compared to peripheral administrators ($M=4.59$). This is not an ideological failure, but a structural symptom of severe role over-extension. Homeroom teachers sit squarely at the volatile center of the

"inclusion vice"—forced to maintain high standardized test scores while absorbing complex behavioral crises without real-time assistance (Cole-Runswick, 2011; Gidlund, 2018). This reality aligns with the warnings of Amendment 11 evaluations (e.g., RAMA, 2023), confirming that unless the systemic burden on homeroom teachers is addressed, abstract policy ideals will continue to cause high rates of teacher burnout.

7. Recommendations

To bridge the gap between ethical intent and structural execution, we propose three systemic interventions:

- **Transition to In-Situ Clinical Mentoring:**

treating teachers as passive executors of policy, and instead provide the concrete resources, time, and clinical support required to sustain their

Replace brief theoretical workshops with sustained, classroom-embedded coaching. Inclusion specialists must model UDL strategies directly within general classrooms, helping teachers turn intuitive practices into structured, conscious pedagogical design.

- **Validation of Alternative Assessment Paradigms:** School leadership must formally endorse non-traditional, project-based learning (PBL) and digital artifact construction as valid alternatives to standardized examinations. This change is crucial to relieve the pressure on homeroom educators and give them the space to implement true UDL strategies.
- **Technological Equalization via AI Frameworks:** Educational policymakers must systematically integrate accessible AI and digital infrastructure into general classrooms. Providing teachers with automated tools for text multi-tiering and multimodal synthesis reduces the preparation time for differentiation, turning UDL from an exhausting emotional effort into an efficient, predictable science of instruction.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that inclusive educational change is sustained "bottom-up" by the moral commitment of homeroom educators. Systemic success requires that educational authorities stop

identities as learning architects of equity.

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