

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

Dr. Nikita Vidhani ^{1*}, Dr. Rajeswari Garg ²

ABSTRACT

Research literacy, the capacity to access, critically evaluate, and apply research-based knowledge to inform professional practice, represents a critical competency for teachers implementing inclusive education. This chapter examines research literacy as a multidimensional construct encompassing research awareness, positive attitudes toward research, research skills, and evidence-based professional practice. The chapter analyzes how research literacy develops among teachers and school leaders, identifying key mechanisms through which school leadership, job demands, and teacher agency facilitate or inhibit engagement with research evidence. Critical barriers to research-informed inclusive practice are examined, including insufficient time for engagement with research, lack of access to high-quality research materials, limited knowledge of research methods, role strain, and organizational constraints. The chapter presents evidence-based strategies for fostering research literacy and enhancing teacher engagement with inclusive education research, including collaborative action research models, teacher-led inquiry approaches, school-university partnerships, and targeted professional development initiatives. The integration of research literacy into teacher education programs and ongoing professional development is essential for advancing inclusive education quality and ensuring that practice modifications are grounded in best available evidence. The chapter concludes that sustainable inclusive education depends fundamentally upon teachers developing research literacy and becoming informed agents in evidence-based educational decision-making rather than passive recipients of externally prescribed innovations.

Keywords: *Research literacy, teacher engagement, inclusive education, evidence-based practice, professional development, collaborative action research, teacher research competence*

1. Defining Research Literacy in Educational Context

1.1 Conceptual Framework and Components

Research literacy can be defined as the capacity of teachers to integrate research-based knowledge with practical and ethical concerns in developing teaching practices that address learner needs. Rather than representing a single, discrete skill, research literacy constitutes a multidimensional construct encompassing several interconnected components.

¹ Assistant Professor, Lakhmi Chand Institute of Technology, Bilaspur, India (Affiliated to: Chhattisgarh Swami Vivekanand Technical University)

² Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur (C.G.), India

* Corresponding Email: nikitavidhani81@gmail.com

Received: November 02, 2025; Revision Received: November 15, 2025; Accepted: December 20, 2025

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

These include: (1) research awareness, understanding what research is, its forms and purposes; (2) attitudes toward research, beliefs about research relevance and utility for professional practice; (3) research skills, abilities to access, read, critically evaluate, and conduct research; and (4) research use as behavior, actively applying research evidence in professional decision-making and practice.

Research literacy extends beyond passive consumption of research to encompass capacity for critical evaluation and professional judgment regarding research applicability to specific contexts. Teachers with developed research literacy can distinguish high-quality from low-quality research, understand limitations and appropriate applications of research findings, and responsibly adapt research-based approaches to their particular classroom contexts. This critical engagement with research differs fundamentally from uncritical implementation of standardized practices regardless of local relevance.

1.2 Research Literacy in Inclusive Education Practice

In inclusive education contexts, research literacy proves particularly essential because effective inclusion requires teachers to navigate complex, context-dependent challenges where research evidence should inform decision-making regarding differentiation, accommodation, and support strategies. Teachers implementing inclusive education must understand research on: evidence-based instructional practices for diverse learners; effectiveness of assistive technology and accommodations; strategies for supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms; peer interactions and belonging; and universal design for learning principles. Without research literacy, teachers may rely on intuition, tradition, or anecdotal evidence rather than systematically examining approaches supported by empirical evidence.

2. Components and Development of Research Literacy

2.1 Dimensionality of Research Literacy

Research literacy comprises distinct but interconnected dimensions that develop through varied pathways:

Research Literacy Dimension	Definition and Examples	Development Pathways	Relevance to Inclusive Education
Research Awareness	Understanding research purposes, types, quality indicators; familiarity with research terminology	Academic coursework; professional reading; research seminars	Teachers understanding distinctions between high/low quality inclusion research
Attitude Toward Research	Beliefs about research relevance, usefulness, trustworthiness; valuing of evidence-based approaches	Positive experiences with research applicability; leadership modeling	Teachers believing research evidence can improve inclusion outcomes for students
Research Access Skills	Ability to locate research; familiarity with databases and search	Library instruction; database training; mentoring; peer modeling	Teachers accessing inclusion research through ERIC, peer-

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

Research Literacy Dimension	Definition and Examples	Development Pathways	Relevance to Inclusive Education
	strategies; technology proficiency		reviewed journals, research syntheses
Research Evaluation Skills	Critically reviewing research; assessing methodological quality; identifying limitations	Research methods courses; journal club participation; critique practice	Teachers evaluating validity of inclusion studies before implementing practices
Research Conduct Skills	Knowledge of research design; ability to collect and analyze data; conducting classroom-based inquiry	Research methods courses; action research projects; mentored research experience	Teachers conducting classroom investigations of inclusion practice effectiveness
Research Application Behavior	Actively using research in decision-making; designing evidence-based interventions; evaluating effectiveness	Reflective practice; action research cycles; collaborative implementation	Teachers implementing research-informed accommodation and differentiation strategies

2.2 Teacher Engagement Mechanisms: The Job Demands-Resources Model

Research examining how teachers develop research literacy reveals that school leadership, job stress, and teacher agency operate through interconnected pathways to either facilitate or inhibit engagement with research. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides theoretical framework explaining how school leadership predicts research literacy through chain mediation of job stress and teacher agency. School leaders, through distributed and transformational approaches, create organizational resources supporting teachers in accessing, evaluating, and applying research evidence. When teachers experience excessive job demands and associated stress, capacity for research engagement diminishes. Conversely, when leaders reduce role strain while simultaneously empowering teachers through autonomy and professional growth opportunities, teacher agency emerges as intrinsic motivation to improve practices through research-informed innovation.

In research involving 751 teachers in inclusive education settings, structural equation modeling revealed that school leadership directly enhanced inclusive education literacy ($\beta = 0.08, p < 0.05$), with significantly larger indirect effects through job stress and teacher agency. The total indirect effect (0.237) substantially exceeded the direct effect, indicating that over 73% of school leadership's impact on inclusive education literacy operated through stress reduction and empowerment mechanisms.

3. Barriers to Research Literacy Development and Implementation

3.1 Individual-Level Barriers

Research consistently identifies multiple barriers operating at individual teacher level that inhibit research literacy development and research-informed practice:

Time Constraints: Teachers report that insufficient time for reading literature, evaluating research, and participating in professional learning activities represents the most significant

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

barrier to engaging with research evidence. Classroom teaching demands, administrative responsibilities, and grading obligations leave limited time for research engagement. Teachers describe feeling "overwhelmed" when asked to incorporate research literacy into already full schedules.

Knowledge Limitations: Teachers frequently lack sufficient understanding of research methods, statistical analysis, or how to critically evaluate research quality. Many teachers did not receive training in research literacy during initial teacher education, creating foundational knowledge gaps that impede independent research engagement. Teachers express uncertainty about distinguishing high-quality from low-quality research, understanding research limitations, and appropriately applying findings to their contexts.

Access Barriers: Limited access to high-quality research materials creates practical obstacles. Many schools lack institutional subscriptions to research databases; teachers lack passwords or training to access available resources. Language barriers, particularly when research is published in English, limit access for non-English speaking teachers. Technology limitations reduce ability to search databases and access full-text articles.

Role Strain: Teachers wearing multiple hats, classroom instruction, administrative duties, mentoring, professional development, experience role strain reducing energy available for research engagement. Teachers with research responsibilities alongside teaching duties face particular challenges allocating sufficient time to either domain.

3.2 Organizational-Level Barriers

Organizational Barrier	Description	Impact on Inclusive Education	Evidence
Insufficient Time Allocation	Schools not allocating dedicated time for research engagement; heavy workload reducing teacher capacity	Teachers cannot engage with inclusion research; practice based on tradition rather than evidence	83.7% of teachers cite lack of time as barrier
Limited Resource Access	Schools lacking research database subscriptions; inadequate library holdings of journals	Teachers cannot access published inclusion research; unable to stay current on evidence	72.2% report lacking internet access at work for research
Human Resource Gaps	Insufficient staffing creating workload; limited personnel with research expertise to mentor teachers	Teachers lack guidance in accessing/interpreting research; feel unsupported in implementation	78.3% cite lack of human resources
Lack of Institutional Support	Schools not valuing research engagement; minimal incentives for professional learning	Teachers not prioritizing research literacy; professional development focused on compliance	Limited institutional recognition of research-informed practice

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

Organizational Barrier	Description	Impact on Inclusive Education	Evidence
Professional Development Limitations	One-time trainings without follow-up; limited practical application focus; insufficient coaching	Teachers cannot maintain new evidence-based practices; skills decay without sustained support	87% of teachers report insufficient professional development in inclusive education
Research-Practice Gap	Fragmented separation between academic research and school practice; researchers not addressing practitioner questions	Research findings feel irrelevant; teachers perceive research as disconnected from classroom reality	Teachers report 65% of research unhelpful for practice decisions

3.3 Systemic-Level Barriers

Broader educational system factors shape research literacy opportunities at multiple levels. Accountability pressures emphasizing test scores may reduce attention to research-based approaches requiring longer implementation timelines. Policies prescribing standardized interventions regardless of context undermine teacher engagement with evidence regarding what works in specific local settings. Limited coordination between teacher education programs and school districts creates discontinuity in research literacy development. Uneven state funding for professional development and research access creates inequitable opportunities across districts and schools.

4. Strategies for Fostering Research Literacy and Teacher Engagement

4.1 Collaborative Action Research Models

Collaborative action research represents a powerful approach for developing research literacy while simultaneously advancing inclusive practices. In this model, teachers partner with university researchers and colleagues to investigate local questions regarding inclusion, systematically collect classroom data, analyze findings, and iteratively refine practices. Research involving action research teams in inclusive schools across multiple countries revealed three mechanisms through which collaborative research promoted inclusive thinking and practices: through teacher collaboration, through development of reflective practice, and through active student participation. In Pakistani schools implementing collaborative action research for inclusion, teachers working with occupational therapists and researchers developed practical strategies, materials, and inclusive lesson plans through action research cycles of plan-act-observe-reflect. This approach proved effective despite challenging context with severe resource limitations, demonstrating that research literacy development and practice improvement need not depend upon abundant resources.

4.2 Inclusive Inquiry Model

The Inclusive Inquiry approach engages students as researchers collaborating with teachers in investigating how to make lessons more inclusive. Teachers and students jointly examine classroom barriers, collect peer feedback on accessibility and belonging, and iteratively design

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

modifications addressing identified problems. This approach simultaneously develops research literacy among teachers and students while centering student voice in inclusion improvement.

Teachers involved in inclusive inquiry reported that student feedback revealed subtle exclusionary practices teachers had overlooked. Student participation transformed teachers from passive professional recipients to active research participants and decision-makers regarding inclusive practice modifications.

4.3 Teacher-Centered Professional Development

Effective professional development fostering research literacy must align with teacher contexts, workloads, and existing interests. Research indicates that blended models combining face-to-face learning with digital resources, mentoring relationships, and application to immediate classroom challenges prove more effective than isolated workshops. Professional development improving teacher research competence showed greater success when integrating:

- **Hands-on research experience:** Teachers conducting classroom-based inquiries develop practical research skills and understand research value
- **Collaborative learning:** Teachers discussing research findings with colleagues, sharing interpretations, and collectively solving implementation challenges develop deeper understanding
- **Coaching and feedback:** Ongoing coaching following professional development sessions improves implementation fidelity and sustained practice change
- **Recognition and credentials:** Providing micro-certifications, professional recognition, and advancement opportunities incentivizes research engagement

4.4 School-University Partnerships

University-school partnerships bridging research and practice prove effective for developing teacher research literacy and advancing inclusive education. In effective partnerships, universities provide research expertise, access to literature, and methodological guidance while schools contribute practical knowledge, context understanding, and identification of relevant research questions. Such partnerships leverage respective strengths while addressing research-practice gap.

Research on school-university partnerships for inclusive education revealed that transformative outcomes depended upon: mutual respect between partners; shared ownership of research questions and findings; teacher voice in research design and interpretation; and commitment to sustainable practice change rather than short-term research outputs.

5. Research Literacy in Teacher Education Programs

5.1 Integrating Research Literacy into Pre-Service Teacher Education

Teacher education programs increasingly recognize that developing research literacy from initial training phase strengthens future inclusive education implementation. Effective integration includes:

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

- Research literacy courses: Dedicated instruction in research methods, research evaluation, and evidence-based practice
- Disciplinary inquiry: Integrating research engagement into content methods courses where prospective teachers conduct classroom inquiries regarding effective teaching approaches
- Research practice: Requiring prospective teachers to design and conduct action research projects examining inclusive education questions
- Journal clubs: Regular engagement with research literature through structured discussions with peers and faculty

Studies examining research competence development in special education teacher preparation found that experimental groups receiving integrated research training showed statistically significant improvements in research skills compared to control groups, with average scores increasing from 57.41 to 82.37%. Moreover, students reported higher motivation and confidence in using research methods and greater readiness for evidence-based practice.

5.2 Research Literacy in Continuous Professional Development

Sustaining and deepening research literacy after initial training requires ongoing professional learning systems. Effective continuous professional development models include:

- Communities of practice: Teacher networks centered on inclusive education research, sharing findings and collaborative problem-solving
- Research reading groups: Regular meetings where teachers collectively read, discuss, and plan application of research articles
- Practitioner research networks: Teachers conducting collaborative inquiries with support from experienced researchers
- Online learning platforms: Digital access to research syntheses, webinars, and interactive learning addressing research literacy components

6. Monitoring and Evaluating Research Literacy Development

6.1 Assessment Instruments and Indicators

Assessment Component	Measurement Methods	Key Indicators	Application in Inclusive Education
Research Awareness	Survey items; interview questions	Understanding research types, quality, terminology; familiarity with research vocabulary	Teachers understanding distinctions between experimental designs, quasi-experimental, qualitative; knowing limitations
Research Attitudes	Likert-scale surveys; interviews	Agreement with research relevance; beliefs about utility for	Teachers rating research as helpful for inclusion decisions; viewing evidence as decision-support

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

Assessment Component	Measurement Methods	Key Indicators	Application in Inclusive Education
		practice; perceived trustworthiness	
Research Skills	Practical assessments; portfolio review	Database search proficiency; critical reading ability; data analysis capability	Teachers locating inclusion research; evaluating intervention study quality; analyzing classroom data
Research Use Behavior	Classroom observations; practice documentation	Evidence of research-informed decision-making; frequency of evidence-based strategy use	Teachers implementing research-based differentiation; documenting rationale for accommodations
Professional Impact	Student outcome data; student feedback; parent perceptions	Student achievement gains; improved belonging; peer acceptance increases	Students experiencing more inclusive practices; reporting greater belonging in classrooms of research-literate teachers

6.2 Measuring Impact on Inclusive Education Implementation

Research literacy development should ultimately improve inclusive education outcomes. Measuring impact requires examining whether teachers with higher research literacy implement evidence-based practices at higher fidelity and with greater effectiveness. Key outcome indicators include:

- Frequency of implementation of research-based universal design for learning principles
- Fidelity of assistive technology and accommodation implementation based on research evidence
- Rates of least restrictive environment placement and genuine inclusion participation
- Peer acceptance and belonging outcomes for students with disabilities
- Achievement gap closure between students with and without disabilities

7. Challenges, Tensions, and Future Directions

7.1 Tensions in Advancing Research Literacy for Inclusive Education

Several important tensions shape efforts to advance research literacy:

Quality vs. Accessibility: High-quality research may be published in limited-access journals or use technical language limiting teacher accessibility. Balancing research quality standards with practitioner accessibility remains ongoing challenge.

Context Specificity vs. Generalizability: Teachers appropriately recognize that research conducted in different contexts may have limited applicability to their specific situations. Developing research literacy includes learning to assess contextual relevance, neither blindly implementing unrelated research nor dismissing research due to context differences.

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

Fidelity vs. Adaptation: Research-based practices often require adaptation to local contexts and student needs, yet maintaining fidelity to core intervention elements is important for effectiveness. Teachers need research literacy to understand which elements are core versus adaptable.

Individual vs. Systemic Change: While teacher research literacy development proves important, sustainable inclusive education requires systemic changes in policies, resources, and structures. Emphasizing teacher research literacy without addressing systemic barriers risks placing change burden on teachers.

7.2 Emerging Directions

Future advancement of research literacy in inclusive education should include:

- Integration of practitioner research: Supporting teachers as researchers investigating inclusive education challenges rather than viewing research as exclusively academic domain
- Community-engaged research: Research partnerships addressing questions identified by marginalized communities and families, not only academic or policy agendas
- Digital tools for research engagement: Developing accessible, user-friendly platforms connecting teachers to synthesized research evidence through accessible formats
- Research literacy policies: Establishing policy requirements for research literacy in teacher education and ongoing expectations for evidence-based practice

Conclusion

Research literacy, the capacity to access, critically evaluate, and apply research evidence to improve teaching and learning, represents a non-negotiable professional competency for teachers implementing inclusive education. Developing robust research literacy requires attention to multiple interconnected factors: individual teacher knowledge, skills, and attitudes; school organizational conditions supporting research engagement; professional development aligned with teacher contexts and needs; and systemic policies supporting evidence-based decision-making. Collaborative action research models, school-university partnerships, integrated teacher education curricula, and sustained professional learning communities provide promising approaches for fostering research literacy. Evidence demonstrates that teachers with developed research literacy implement inclusive practices with greater fidelity, engage more intentionally with student learning data, and demonstrate greater capacity to adapt evidence-based approaches to local contexts. As educational systems advance inclusive education agendas, deliberate investment in developing teacher research literacy represents essential infrastructure for sustainable, evidence-based improvement in inclusive education quality and outcomes for all learners.

References

- Ainscow, M., & Messiou, K. (2017). Multilevel participation and inclusion: A holistic vision. *Educational Review*, 69(2), 217–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2016.1270871>

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

- Brown, C. (2022). Facilitating research-informed educational practice for inclusion: Understanding research engagement by teachers and school leaders. *Frontiers in Education, 7*, 890832. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.890832>
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. Teachers College Press.
- Cook, B. G., & Odom, S. L. (2013). Evidence-based practices and implementation science in special education. *Exceptional Children, 79*(2), 135–144.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 8*(1), 1–44.
- Georgiou, D., Mertanen, K., & Phipps, D. (2020). Evidence-based practice in teacher education. *Frontiers in Education, 5*, 559192. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.559192>
- Hallinger, P., Hosseingholizadeh, R., Tavakoli, K., & Zhang, J. (2017). Do principal leadership practices associated with school effectiveness diffuse to influence teacher evaluation practice? A multiphase mixed methods study. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 46*(6), 910–933.
- Kazancı Tınmaz, A., Yıldız, H., & Özçakır-Sümen, Ö. (2023). Development of the research literacy scale for teachers. *SAGE Open, 13*, 21582440231199033. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231199033>
- Kuyini, A. B., Yinping, P., & Alhassan, A. M. (2021). Teachers' knowledge and attitudes about inclusive education: A semi-systematic literature review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 25*(12), 1430–1452.
- Manspeaker, S., Van Lunen, B., Nappe, K., & Healy, B. (2011). Overcoming barriers to implementation of evidence-based practice in athletic training. *Journal of Athletic Training, 46*(2), 196–205.
- Merz-Atalik, K., & Beck, J. (2023). Developing inclusive school systems for all learners: A participatory multilevel network analysis approach. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 28*(4), 437–455.
- Parish, D. M. (2022). Evidence-based practices and teacher practice: Investigating barriers to implementation. [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Rao, K., & Wang, X. C. (2024). Universal design for learning and its implementation in inclusive early childhood classrooms. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 43*(4), 269–282.
- Ruppar, A. L., Dymond, S. K., & Gaffney, J. S. (2018). Collaborative research: A new paradigm for systemic change in special education. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 31*(1), 15–26.
- Sajid, M., Malik, A. U., & Saqlain, M. (2025). Collaborative action research as an approach to school improvement in Pakistan. *Educational Research Review, 36*, 100471.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review, 57*(1), 1–22.
- Snow, P. C. (2015). Bridging the gap between research and practice. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 17*(6), 540–541.
- Tveitnes, M. S., & Birkeland, I. K. (2025). Mainstream teachers' competence in inclusive special education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 40*(3), 412–428.
- Wang, T., & Tian, H. (2023). School leadership and teacher agency in inclusive education: Exploring the chain mediation effect of job stress and teacher agency. *International Journal of Educational Research, 121*, 102197.

Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context

- Zhou, X., & Wang, Y. (2017). Teacher inclusive education literacy assessment: A multidimensional construct. *Journal of Educational Research Online*, 9(1), 123–145.
- Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college- and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 89–99.

Acknowledgments

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Vidhani, N. & Garg, R. (2025). Research Literacy and Inclusive Practice: Examining the Role of Leadership, Agency, and Organizational Context. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 10(4), 69-79. DIP: 18.02.707/20251004, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1004707