

**Understanding self-fulfillment among Special Education teachers:  
A descriptive literature review**

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**ABSTRACT**

Teacher self-fulfillment is a key influence on quality and commitment in special education. Beyond job satisfaction, self-fulfillment reflects personal growth, value alignment, and a sense of meaning that sustains professional resilience. This descriptive review systematically synthesizes 38 empirical studies published between 2013 and 2025, focusing on special education teachers in primary and secondary school settings. Studies spanned multiple regions, including Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, and covered both preservice and in-service teachers investigated through qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs. Articles were identified using PRISMA guidelines, with inclusion criteria emphasizing empirical analyses of barriers to fulfillment, professional identity, and the influence of institutional support, professional development, and collaboration. The analysis highlights persistent obstacles such as excessive workload, emotional strain, inadequate preparation, institutional shortcomings, and professional isolation, all of which constrain teachers' professional growth and well-being. At the same time, evidence shows that supportive school climates, equitable workload distribution, continuous professional learning, and collaborative cultures strengthen resilience, efficacy, and identity. The review concludes with policy and practice recommendations that emphasize fair resource allocation, embedded emotional and practical support, and sustained research using longitudinal and mixed methods designs to enhance teacher self-fulfillment, well-being, and retention in inclusive education systems.

**Keywords:** self-efficacy, teacher well-being, inclusive education, emotional resilience

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher self-fulfillment is critically important in special education, influencing not only personal well-being but also professional resilience, instructional effectiveness, and long-term commitment. Studies have linked fulfillment to a strong sense of purpose, emotional connection with students, and the perceived value of fostering inclusive education (Dor-Haim, 2024; Hosley, 2019). Fulfilled teachers are more likely to adapt to complex instructional and behavioral challenges and maintain consistent engagement despite emotional demands (Ryan & Mathews, 2022; Wittwer et al., 2023). This sense of psychological empowerment contributes directly to effective classroom management and the cultivation of inclusive and supportive learning environments (Love et al., 2019; Klefbeck, 2023). Therefore, fulfillment functions not only as a personal resource but also as a professional driver, reinforcing self-efficacy, strengthening identity, and enriching the overall learning climate. Recognizing this dynamic elevates teacher fulfillment from a peripheral concern to the central pillar of inclusive education.

Although self-fulfillment is often mentioned alongside job satisfaction and well-being, treating them as the same overlooks key differences that matter for understanding special education teachers' experiences. Self-fulfillment involves personal growth, acting according to one's values, and finding meaning in life (Döring et al., 2024; Souza et al., 2024; Zalewska, 2023). This deeper process is more than just liking a job or feeling happy. For example, when teachers face heavy workloads, emotional strain, or poor support, their path to fulfillment is blocked, even if they report job satisfaction (Moslehpoor et al., 2023; Janardhan & Banu, 2024). Teaching children with special needs often shapes teachers' self-perception, affecting their confidence, emotional well-being, and sense of identity (Shulzhenko, 2024; Svobodina & Khristoforova, 2020; Beijaard et al., 2022). Supportive training, strong leadership, and opportunities to collaborate are not just helpful extras but key parts of helping teachers grow and feel fulfilled in their work (Nilawati et al., 2021; Moura & Oliveira-Silva, 2019).

Despite its acknowledged value, the pursuit of self-fulfillment is frequently hindered by systemic and structural constraints. Many special educators report feeling underprepared and undervalued, which diminishes their morale and contributes to attrition (Klefbeck, 2023; Dor-Haim, 2024). These disconnects between the recognized importance of fulfillment, and the lack of institutional support reflect a longstanding tension in the profession. Although research highlights the promise of interventions such as mentorship, reflective practice, and targeted professional development (Love et al., 2019; Ryan & Mathews, 2022), these strategies are often inconsistently applied when addressing this gap requires a system-wide shift that frames teacher fulfillment as a shared institutional responsibility. This can enhance job satisfaction, improve retention, and strengthen the sustainability of inclusive education practices.

This descriptive literature review aims to synthesize and examine empirical studies published between 2013 and 2025 that investigated self-fulfillment among special education teachers in primary and secondary schools. The review identifies and analyzes persistent barriers to self-fulfillment, examines how engagement with students with special needs shapes teachers' self-perception and professional identity, and assesses the influence of institutional support, targeted professional development, and collaborative practices on educators' experiences. By integrating contemporary evidence, this review seeks to deepen our understanding of the personal and organizational conditions that impact self-fulfillment among special education teachers. This study aims to inform future research, support data-driven policy development, and offer practical

guidance for creating school environments that nurture both teacher, teacher well-being and professional growth.

### Statement of the problem

This study aims to synthesize empirical research published between 2013 and 2025 on self-fulfillment among special education teachers in primary and secondary schools. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Identify the common barriers that hinder self-fulfillment among special education teachers as reported in the literature.
2. Examine how engagement with students with special needs influences teachers' self-perception and professional identity.
3. Analyze the influence of institutional factors, including leadership support, professional development, mentoring, and collaborative practices, on teachers' self-fulfillment.
4. Clarify how self-fulfillment is conceptually distinguished from job satisfaction and general well-being in existing studies.
5. Determine the implications of the synthesized findings for policy development, school leadership, and future research aimed at enhancing self-fulfillment among special education teachers.

### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive literature review design to systematically explore and synthesize existing empirical knowledge on teacher self-fulfillment within the context of special education. This approach was appropriate given that the study did not aim to test hypotheses or evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions, but rather to integrate conceptual, empirical, and contextual findings in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the personal, emotional, and institutional factors that shape fulfillment among special education teachers. The descriptive review method is particularly suited to examining complex and multidimensional educational phenomena, as it allows for the identification of dominant concepts, theoretical patterns, and gaps within a diverse and evolving body of literature. In line with this purpose, the review emphasized the integration of findings across varied research designs, contexts, and populations to construct a holistic and interpretive synthesis of teacher self-fulfillment.

The literature selection process followed a rigorous and systematic procedure guided by established review standards to ensure transparency and methodological integrity. Empirical studies were identified through comprehensive database searches using carefully structured search terms aligned with the population, key constructs, and contextual factors relevant to the study. Searches were conducted in major academic databases commonly used in educational and psychological research, and Boolean logic was applied to refine results and ensure conceptual precision. Only peer reviewed and credible sources were considered in order to maintain the rigor and reliability of the review. Each retrieved study underwent multiple stages of screening and evaluation to assess its methodological soundness, theoretical contribution, and relevance to the central focus on teacher self-fulfillment in special education settings.

Following the screening process, a total of thirty-eight empirical studies published between 2013 and 2025 were selected for inclusion. The review focused exclusively on studies involving

pre service and in service special education teachers working in primary and secondary school contexts. Studies were required to examine self-fulfillment or closely related constructs such as professional identity, job satisfaction, emotional well-being, stress, burnout, or institutional support as central components of the investigation. Research that explored barriers to fulfillment, the influence of teaching learners with special needs on teachers' self-perception and identity, and the role of organizational support, professional development, mentoring, and collaboration was given particular emphasis. Studies were excluded if they focused on populations outside special education teaching, were situated in early childhood or higher education contexts, or lacked a substantive empirical focus on teacher related outcomes.

Data analysis was conducted using a manual thematic synthesis process consistent with descriptive review methodology. Each selected study was read repeatedly to ensure thorough familiarization with its content, context, and findings. Key information related to research design, participant characteristics, setting, and major outcomes was systematically extracted and organized into an analytical matrix to support comparison and synthesis across studies. The analysis progressed through iterative stages that involved organizing studies by key characteristics, grouping findings into recurring conceptual themes, and interpreting patterns and relationships across the literature. This interpretive process enabled the identification of converging insights and contrasting perspectives related to barriers to self-fulfillment, emotional and professional challenges, institutional conditions, and identity development among special education teachers. Manual coding was deliberately employed to allow close engagement with each text and to preserve contextual nuance and theoretical coherence throughout the synthesis.

Ethical considerations were inherent in the review process, as all data were derived from previously published studies. Proper attribution to original authors was consistently maintained, and no primary data involving human participants were collected. The exclusive use of verified and peer reviewed sources further ensured ethical compliance and scholarly integrity. Overall, this unified methodological approach supported a rigorous, transparent, and interpretive synthesis of the literature, enabling a deeper understanding of the conditions that support or hinder self-fulfillment among special education teachers and providing a sound foundation for implications relevant to policy, practice, and future research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings of the descriptive literature review, drawing directly from the synthesis of thirty-eight empirical studies published between 2013 and 2025 that examined self-fulfillment among special education teachers in primary and secondary school contexts. Guided by a descriptive review design, the study employed systematic screening procedures and manual thematic synthesis to analyze peer reviewed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research involving both pre service and in service special education teachers across diverse national settings. The analysis integrated findings related to barriers to self-fulfillment, teachers' self-perception and professional identity, and the role of institutional support, professional development, and collaboration. The discussion that follows is grounded entirely in the reviewed data and interprets the results in direct relation to the study's objectives, situating them within existing theoretical and empirical literature to deepen understanding of teacher self-fulfillment in special education.

The reviewed studies collectively represented a wide range of educational contexts, including urban and rural schools, inclusive and specialized settings, and systems with varying

levels of resources and policy support. Participants across the studies included novice and experienced special education teachers, preservice teachers enrolled in teacher education programs, and specialists working with learners with diverse disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, and behavioral and emotional challenges. This diversity provides a robust contextual foundation for interpreting the findings, as it reflects the heterogeneity of special education environments and highlights how structural, cultural, and institutional conditions shape teachers' experiences. The distribution of contexts across both high income and low to middle income countries further suggests that challenges to self-fulfillment are not isolated to a single educational system but represent a global concern within the profession.

Across the literature, excessive workload and role multiplicity emerged as a consistent and dominant barrier to teacher self-fulfillment. Studies repeatedly reported that special education teachers are required to juggle instructional responsibilities alongside extensive administrative, behavioral management, documentation, and coordination tasks. Evidence from teacher trainees and practicing educators showed that these overlapping roles reduce time for meaningful instruction and reflection, weaken teachers' sense of instructional identity, and limit opportunities for professional growth. Even in contexts where teachers reported moderate to high job satisfaction, the persistent burden of non-instructional responsibilities constrained their ability to experience fulfillment derived from purposeful teaching. These findings suggest that fulfillment is particularly sensitive to how teachers' time and roles are structured, reinforcing the argument that workload redistribution and role clarity are essential conditions for sustaining professional meaning in special education.

Emotional labor and psychological strain were also identified as significant impediments to self-fulfillment. The reviewed studies demonstrated that prolonged emotional engagement with students with complex needs often leads to compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion, especially when teachers lack adequate coping resources or institutional support. Importantly, the literature distinguished emotional fatigue rooted in empathic engagement from burnout associated with organizational stressors, highlighting the unique emotional demands of special education teaching. Teachers who reported high levels of personal stress traits or limited social support were particularly vulnerable to emotional depletion. At the same time, evidence showed that emotional regulation strategies, work life balance practices, and supportive school climates can mitigate these effects. These findings underscore that emotional labor is an inherent aspect of special education teaching and must be addressed through sustained, systemic support rather than short term wellness initiatives.

Inadequate professional preparation further compounded challenges to self-fulfillment, particularly among preservice and early career teachers. Across multiple national contexts, teachers reported feeling underprepared to manage neurodiverse classrooms, challenging behaviors, and inclusive instructional demands due to limited practicum exposure, insufficient mentorship, and fragmented induction processes. Although evidence-based practices and inclusive pedagogies are well documented in the literature, many teacher education programs fail to integrate these approaches effectively into training. As a result, teachers often enter the profession with fragile self-efficacy and heightened emotional strain. Studies consistently showed that targeted training in differentiated instruction, assistive technologies, and behavior management strengthens instructional confidence and contributes to a more positive professional self-concept. These findings highlight professional preparation as a foundational determinant of long-term fulfillment and resilience in special education.

Institutional shortcomings related to leadership, resources, and professional development structures were repeatedly linked to diminished self-fulfillment. The reviewed studies revealed that disengaged leadership, limited access to teaching materials, unsuitable learning environments, and generic professional development programs undermine teachers' sense of competence and belonging. In contrast, schools characterized by responsive leadership, clear policies, and recognition of teachers' work foster higher occupational satisfaction and lower emotional exhaustion. Notably, some studies reported that teachers' perceived preparedness for inclusion declined over time, suggesting that the absence of sustained institutional support erodes fulfillment even among experienced educators. These findings emphasize that self-fulfillment is not static but depends on continuous organizational investment in teachers' professional growth and working conditions.

Professional isolation emerged as another critical barrier, particularly for teachers working in rural or under resourced settings. Geographic remoteness, scarcity of specialist colleagues, and limited opportunities for collaboration intensified feelings of isolation and reduced job satisfaction. Teachers responsible for supervising paraprofessionals or implementing inclusive practices without adequate leadership backing experienced heightened role strain and diminished self-efficacy. Within mainstream schools, weak collaboration with colleagues, support staff, and families further contributed to stress and disengagement. The evidence consistently showed that isolation undermines professional identity and fulfillment, pointing to the importance of institutionalized collaboration and peer support networks in sustaining teachers' sense of connection and purpose.

Beyond barriers, the review revealed that teaching students with special needs profoundly shapes educators' self-perception and professional identity. Engagement in inclusive practices often expands teachers' role definitions, positioning them as collaborators, curriculum designers, and socio emotional support providers. Studies demonstrated that exposure to targeted training and innovative pedagogical frameworks enhances self-efficacy and empowers teachers to view their capabilities more expansively. Quantitative findings consistently showed moderate to high levels of self-efficacy among special educators, although heavier caseloads were associated with slight reductions in confidence, particularly in behavior management. Overall, the literature indicates that confidence in addressing complex learner needs reinforces positive self-image and sustains intrinsic motivation.

Emotional engagement with students also played a dual role in shaping self-perception. While sustained empathy enriched teachers' sense of meaning and professional worth, it also increased vulnerability to emotional exhaustion in the absence of effective coping mechanisms. Teachers who employed problem focused strategies, cognitive reframing, and social support were better able to maintain self-worth and professional commitment. These findings suggest that emotional labor, when supported by adaptive coping and reflective practices, can become a source of growth rather than depletion.

The broader professional environment further influenced teachers' self-perception and fulfillment. Strong relationships with colleagues, mentors, and administrators validated teachers' efforts and supported shared problem solving. Evidence from multiple contexts showed that perceived peer and supervisory support was associated with higher academic and professional self-efficacy, clearer professional identity, and a stronger sense of coherence. These findings reinforce the idea that fulfillment is relationally constructed and deeply embedded in school culture.

Institutional support, professional development, and collaboration emerged as interdependent mechanisms that collectively promote teacher fulfillment. Organizational support

in the form of recognition, clear policies, and access to resources was consistently associated with higher job satisfaction and reduced burnout. Mentoring relationships and professional learning communities further protected teachers from emotional fatigue and enhanced perceived competence. Professional development was most effective when it was context specific, continuous, and aligned with teachers' emotional and instructional realities. Training initiatives that incorporated follow up coaching and reflective components produced more sustained gains in self-efficacy and resilience.

Collaboration functioned as a critical bridge connecting institutional support and professional learning to daily practice. Studies showed that collaborative models such as co teaching and site based coaching enhanced instructional quality while reducing isolation and stress. Collaborative efficacy was strongly linked to teaching quality and job satisfaction, particularly when partnerships were grounded in mutual respect and supported by leadership. These findings demonstrate that collaboration must be embedded within institutional systems to yield enduring benefits for teacher fulfillment.

Taken together, the results of this review demonstrate that self-fulfillment among special education teachers is shaped by a dynamic interaction among organizational structures, professional relationships, and individual adaptive capacities. The evidence consistently shows that fulfillment cannot be reduced to personal disposition alone but is deeply influenced by workload organization, emotional demands, professional preparation, leadership practices, and collaborative cultures. While methodological limitations such as cross-sectional designs and reliance on self-report measures temper causal interpretations, the convergence of findings across contexts strengthens the credibility of the conclusions.

In synthesis, the reviewed literature underscores that fostering self-fulfillment in special education requires system level reforms that address structural barriers, strengthen professional preparation, and institutionalize supportive and collaborative practices. By illuminating how organizational ecosystems shape teachers' sense of meaning, identity, and resilience, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of fulfillment as a central pillar of sustainable inclusive education. These insights provide a strong foundation for subsequent discussion of implications for policy, practice, and future research.

## CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that self-fulfillment among special education teachers is shaped by a complex and interrelated set of personal, organizational, and systemic factors. Across the synthesized evidence, excessive workload and role multiplicity, sustained emotional labor, inadequate professional preparation, institutional shortcomings, and professional isolation consistently emerged as major barriers that undermine teachers' sense of purpose, efficacy, and professional identity. These challenges are most pronounced in contexts where administrative policies, leadership practices, and resource allocation fail to reflect the realities of special education classrooms, resulting in heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and diminished opportunities for meaningful professional growth. At the same time, the findings clearly indicate that self-fulfillment is not an unattainable ideal. When teachers operate within environments that provide balanced workloads, emotional and psychological support, responsive leadership, and access to relevant professional learning, they are better equipped to manage occupational demands and to experience sustained personal and professional development.

The review further highlights that effective responses to these challenges must be grounded in coordinated institutional action. Educational leaders play a critical role in fostering self-fulfillment by regularly reviewing and equitably distributing responsibilities so that teachers retain sufficient time for instruction, planning, reflection, and professional learning. The integration of emotional and psychological support into everyday school practices, through structured mentoring, peer support mechanisms, and accessible counseling services, is essential for mitigating emotional strain and preventing long term exhaustion. Equally important is the strengthening of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. Preparation programs must provide mentored and practice-based experiences that accurately reflect the complexities of inclusive and special education settings, while professional development initiatives should be continuous, context responsive, and collaboratively designed to address both instructional and emotional demands. The establishment of sustained professional communities within and across schools also emerges as a vital strategy for reducing isolation, particularly in rural or under resourced contexts, and for promoting shared learning, resilience, and innovation.

At the broader policy and research levels, the findings underscore the need for systemic commitment to equity, inclusivity, and evidence informed decision making. Policies must prioritize fair resource distribution, inclusive and supportive leadership structures, and long-term investment in teacher development and well-being. The review also identifies important directions for future research, particularly the need for longitudinal and mixed methods studies that employ standardized measures and diverse samples to capture changes in self-fulfillment over time and to clarify the sustained effects of institutional support, professional development, and collaboration. Research and policy frameworks must remain adaptable and sensitive to contextual differences in order to respond effectively to the evolving needs of special education teachers. By acting on these insights, educational systems can create conditions that nurture teacher self-fulfillment and resilience, thereby strengthening the sustainability of inclusive education and supporting the delivery of equitable and high-quality learning experiences for all students.

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