

Humanising Special Education: A Review of Humanistic Theory, Learner-Centred Practice and Teaching Strategies for Students with Special Educational Needs

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Abstract

Special education is often discussed through the language of intervention, adaptation, diagnosis and support. Although these dimensions are necessary, they may become insufficient when the emotional, social and personal experiences of students with special educational needs are overlooked. Humanistic theory offers a valuable lens for rethinking special education because it positions learners as whole persons with dignity, agency, emotions, potential and the right to meaningful participation. This review examines how humanistic theory informs learner-centred teaching, emotional support, teacher-student relationships and inclusive practices for students with special educational needs. Methodologically, this article adopted a narrative and thematic review approach. Literature was retrieved from the Scopus database and limited to English-language articles and review papers published between 2020 and 2026. From 47 documents initially identified, 13 highly relevant studies were selected and analysed thematically. The review identifies five major themes: learner-centred education, emotional safety, teacher empathy, motivation and participation, and dignity-oriented inclusive practice. The findings suggest that humanistic theory remains relevant in special education because it challenges deficit-based views of disability and encourages teaching strategies that are flexible, respectful, relational and responsive to individual needs. The article concludes that a humanistic approach can strengthen special education by connecting instructional practice with students' well-being, self-worth, autonomy and sense of belonging.

Keywords: Humanistic Theory, Special Education, Inclusive Education, Learner-Centred Teaching, Special Educational Needs

Article Progress
Received: 10 May 2026
Revised: 24 May 2026
Accepted: 05 June 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

Special education extends beyond the technical processes of curriculum adaptation, instructional modification and behaviour management. Fundamentally, it is a human-centred educational endeavour that requires teachers to recognise the dignity, emotions, lived experiences and developmental potential of every learner. This perspective is particularly important for students with special educational needs (SEN), whose educational experiences are shaped not only by cognitive, behavioural or developmental characteristics but also by social acceptance, emotional well-being, self-confidence and the quality of interpersonal relationships within the learning environment.

Despite increasing recognition of inclusive education, students with SEN continue to be viewed predominantly through a deficit-oriented lens in many educational contexts. They are frequently characterised by their functional limitations, support requirements or difficulties in meeting conventional academic expectations. Although such information is essential for educational planning and intervention, an exclusive emphasis on deficits may unintentionally restrict teachers' perceptions of learners and overlook their strengths, interests, aspirations and capacity for personal growth. Consequently, the learner may become defined by disability rather than recognised as a whole person with unique abilities and potential. It is within this context that humanistic theory offers a particularly valuable perspective for special education.

Humanistic theory conceptualises learners as holistic individuals whose intellectual, emotional, social and personal development are intrinsically interconnected. Rather than focusing solely on academic achievement, it emphasises the importance of fostering emotional well-being, self-worth, autonomy, intrinsic motivation and self-actualisation. From a humanistic perspective, meaningful learning occurs when students experience psychological safety, respect, acceptance and active participation in the educational process. These principles are rooted in the seminal works of Maslow (1943) and Rogers (1969), whose contributions continue to shape contemporary learner-centred education, counselling practices, teacher–student relationships and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

The relevance of humanistic theory is particularly evident within special education, where many students encounter repeated academic failure, social exclusion, negative comparisons with peers, diminished expectations and challenges in communicating their needs. Under such circumstances, instructional adaptations alone are often insufficient to support meaningful learning. Students also require educational environments characterised by trust, empathy and encouragement, where teachers acknowledge incremental progress, respond sensitively to individual differences and facilitate authentic participation in learning. Humanistic theory therefore serves not merely as a philosophical orientation but as a practical pedagogical framework that promotes compassionate, inclusive and responsive educational practice.

Recent scholarship further demonstrates the continued relevance of humanistic principles within contemporary special education. Humanistic values increasingly underpin discussions surrounding inclusive education, learner-centred pedagogy, disability support, teacher beliefs, emotional well-being, self-awareness and quality of life. For example, Dharin and Rohmad (2022) demonstrated how humanistic approaches can promote independent learning among students with disabilities, while Neuman et al. (2024) argued that a humanistic perspective provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding quality of life among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Similarly, studies examining inclusive pedagogy, teacher–student trust, self-awareness, social acceptance and positive behaviour support collectively suggest that effective special education should be grounded in respect for human dignity, meaningful relationships and active learner participation.

Against this background, the present review examines the relevance of humanistic theory to contemporary special education. Specifically, it explores the fundamental principles of humanistic theory, analyses how these principles are reflected in recent empirical literature and discusses their implications for teaching strategies designed to support students with special educational needs. This article adopts a narrative and thematic review approach rather than a systematic or bibliometric review, as its primary objective is to synthesise conceptual perspectives and practical insights that can inform educational practice and strengthen the humanistic foundations of inclusive special education.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The central problem addressed in this article is the tendency for special education to be interpreted mainly through remedial, diagnostic or behaviour-management lenses. These approaches are not necessarily wrong. Assessment, intervention, curriculum adaptation and structured support remain essential in special education, particularly when teachers need to respond to diverse learning, behavioural and developmental needs (Alanazi et al., 2023; Dotson & Hume, 2026). However, when these approaches dominate practice, there is a risk that the learner is viewed primarily as an object of intervention rather than as a developing person with emotions, preferences, aspirations and

agency. This concern reflects the continuing relevance of humanistic theory, which emphasises the learner's dignity, self-worth, motivation and potential for growth (Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1969).

This issue is significant because students with special educational needs often experience schooling in ways that affect their self-concept, motivation and participation. Repeated correction, comparison with typically developing peers, social exclusion or overemphasis on deficits may reduce confidence and limit the learner's willingness to participate in classroom activities. Studies on emotional well-being, social acceptance and inclusive education suggest that psychological and relational factors are closely connected to learning experiences among students with disabilities (Kabasakal & Emiroğlu, 2021; Neuman et al., 2024). A learner who is constantly reminded of difficulty may gradually internalise a sense of incompetence. Humanistic theory responds to this problem by shifting attention from what the student lacks to what the student needs to feel safe, valued and capable of learning.

Another problem is that inclusive education is sometimes reduced to placement. A student may be physically present in a mainstream or special education classroom yet still feel emotionally excluded if the classroom climate does not support belonging and participation. Dubovicki and Topolovčan (2021) emphasised that inclusion requires methodological and social attention, including creative teaching and recognition of students with disabilities as active participants. Similarly, Friesen and Cuning (2020) showed that teachers' beliefs about inclusion matter because such beliefs shape how teachers respond to learner diversity. These studies indicate that inclusion cannot be understood only as access to a classroom; it must also involve acceptance, participation and meaningful learning.

The literature also suggests that emotional and relational dimensions of learning are not always treated as central teaching concerns. Kabasakal and Emiroğlu (2021) demonstrated that rational-emotive education can influence subjective well-being, self-efficacy and social acceptance. Dharin and Rohmad (2022) also highlighted the importance of supportive and humanistic learning conditions in developing independence among students with disabilities. Such evidence indicates that psychological safety, teacher support and learner autonomy are closely related to participation in inclusive settings. Therefore, a review of humanistic theory is needed to clarify how emotional safety, teacher empathy, autonomy and dignity can become explicit elements of teaching strategies for students with special educational needs.

The problem is not a lack of teaching methods. Rather, the problem is the need for a coherent theoretical lens that can humanise those methods. Humanistic theory provides such a lens because it reminds educators that the aim of special education is not merely task completion, behavioural compliance or curriculum coverage, but the holistic development of learners who deserve respect, participation and opportunities to grow. By reviewing recent literature through a humanistic lens, this article seeks to strengthen the connection between special education practice and the learner's dignity, well-being, agency and sense of belonging.

3. OBJECTIVES

This article is guided by the following objectives:

- i. To explain the key concepts and principles of humanistic theory that are relevant to special education.
- ii. To analyse how recent literature reflects humanistic principles such as learner-centredness, emotional support, teacher empathy, motivation, dignity and inclusion.
- iii. To discuss the application of humanistic theory in teaching strategies for students with special educational needs.
- iv. To identify the importance of humanistic theory in strengthening inclusive and special education practice.

4. METHODOLOGY

This review was conducted using literature retrieved from the Scopus database. The search strategy focused on keywords related to humanistic theory, humanistic education, learner-centred education, student-centred learning, inclusive education, special education, students with disabilities and students with special educational needs. Scopus was selected as the primary database because it provides comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature across the fields of education, psychology, the social sciences, health and disability studies.

The search was restricted to English-language journal articles and review papers published between 2020 and 2026. This publication period was selected to ensure that the review reflected contemporary developments while providing sufficient breadth for a comprehensive thematic analysis. Following the application of the inclusion criteria and database filters, 47 records were identified. The titles, abstracts and keywords of these records were subsequently screened to determine their relevance to the objectives of the review.

Studies were considered highly relevant if they addressed one or more of the following areas: humanistic approaches to education, learner-centred pedagogy, inclusive education, disability support, teacher–student relationships, emotional well-being, self-awareness, dignity, quality of life, motivation, social acceptance or teaching strategies for students with special educational needs. Studies that addressed these topics only indirectly or lacked a clear educational or disability-related focus were classified as having moderate or low relevance. Following the screening process, 13 articles were selected for inclusion in the final review.

The selected studies were analysed using thematic analysis, as the primary objective of this review was to identify and synthesise recurring conceptual patterns rather than to examine publication trends or conduct bibliometric analyses. Five overarching themes emerged from the analysis: learner-centred education, emotional safety, teacher empathy and relational teaching, motivation and student participation, and dignity-oriented inclusive practice. These themes provide the analytical framework for the presentation and discussion of the review findings.

Table 1: Literature Search and Screening Process

Stage	Description	Number of Records
Database search	Scopus search using humanistic, learner-centred, inclusive and special education terms	47
Screening	Titles, abstracts and keywords screened for relevance	47
Core selection	Highly relevant studies selected for thematic review	13

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The review identified five themes that explain how humanistic theory can inform special education. These themes are interconnected rather than separate. Learner-centred education provides the pedagogical foundation, emotional safety creates readiness to learn, teacher empathy shapes the relational environment, motivation supports participation, and dignity-oriented inclusion connects classroom practice with quality of life. Together, these themes show that humanistic special education is both a theoretical orientation and a practical approach to teaching.

Table 2: Thematic Synthesis of Core Literature

Theme	Humanistic Focus	Representative Sources
Learner-centred education	Individual potential, self-awareness and flexible learning pathways	Matiushchenko et al. (2025); Alanazi et al. (2023)
Emotional safety	Well-being, acceptance and psychological readiness	Kabasakal and Emiroğlu (2021); Dharin and Rohmad (2022)
Teacher empathy	Trust, reflective beliefs and relational teaching	Özkan (2025); Friesen and Cuning (2020)
Motivation and participation	Autonomy, meaningful engagement and accessible learning	Girón-Gamero and Franco-Mariscal (2023); Conde et al. (2026)
Dignity-oriented inclusion	Quality of life, positive behaviour support and rehumanisation	Neuman et al. (2024); Dotson and Hume (2026); Boyd et al. (2026)

5.1 Learner-Centred Education and Individual Potential

Learner-centred education is one of the clearest expressions of humanistic theory. It shifts the focus of teaching from the delivery of content to the needs, experiences and potential of learners. In special education, this shift is essential because students with special educational needs do not learn in uniform ways. They differ in cognitive profile, communication ability, emotional regulation, sensory needs, behaviour, pace of learning and social development. A humanistic approach therefore begins with the question of who the learner is before deciding what method should be used.

Matiushchenko et al. (2025) emphasised the importance of fostering self-awareness among students with special needs in inclusive education. Their study is significant because it moves beyond the idea of students as passive recipients of support. Instead, students are encouraged to understand their own strengths and challenges. From a humanistic perspective, this is important because self-awareness contributes to agency. When students begin to recognise what helps them learn, what

challenges them and how they can participate, they become more active in their own educational development.

Alanazi et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of pedagogical strategies that influence teacher attitudes and student learning outcomes in special education and autism classrooms. Their work suggests that special education should be responsive to the specific needs of learners rather than relying on rigid, teacher-dominated instruction. This aligns with the humanistic belief that teaching should be flexible and responsive to the learner's individuality.

Learner-centred education also appears in studies related to active learning and inclusive pedagogy. Conde et al. (2026), for instance, reviewed the benefits of robotics and active learning methodologies for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in STEAM education. Although robotics may appear technical, the deeper pedagogical value lies in active participation, interaction and adaptive engagement. Such methods support humanistic teaching because they provide learners with opportunities to act, explore, respond and experience learning in concrete ways.

In special education, learner-centred practice requires teachers to ask deeper questions. Instead of asking only whether a student has completed a task, teachers should also ask whether the task is meaningful, accessible and emotionally manageable for the student. This reflects a more humanised approach to teaching, where individual potential is nurtured rather than measured only against standard expectations.

5.2 Emotional Safety and Psychological Readiness to Learn

A second major theme is the importance of emotional safety. Humanistic theory argues that learning is strongly influenced by emotional conditions. A student who feels anxious, rejected or unsafe may find it difficult to focus, participate or take risks in learning. This issue is especially relevant for students with special educational needs, who may experience repeated academic frustration, social misunderstanding or behavioural correction.

Kabasakal and Emiroğlu (2021) examined the effect of rational-emotive education on irrational thinking, subjective well-being and self-efficacy among typically developing students, as well as social acceptance of disabled students. Their findings are useful for this review because they demonstrate the relationship between emotional development, self-belief and social acceptance. From a humanistic perspective, these dimensions are central to learning. A classroom that supports emotional well-being is more likely to become a space where students with disabilities can participate with greater confidence.

Emotional safety is not a soft or secondary issue in special education. It is a condition that shapes learning readiness. Students who feel safe are more willing to try new tasks, tolerate mistakes and accept guidance from teachers. In contrast, students who feel judged or misunderstood may withdraw, resist or display challenging behaviours. A humanistic interpretation of such behaviour encourages teachers to look beneath the surface. Behaviour may indicate frustration, anxiety, sensory overload, communication difficulty or unmet emotional needs.

Dharin and Rohmad (2022) also noted that students with disabilities require supportive learning conditions to develop independence. Their study, conducted during a period when learning was affected by the pandemic, shows that communication, learning methods and emotional atmosphere matter greatly for disabled students. The finding is important because it demonstrates that independence cannot be demanded from students without first providing a learning environment that enables independence.

Therefore, emotional safety should be seen as a core teaching strategy in special education. It can be developed through predictable routines, warm teacher communication, positive reinforcement, opportunities for success, respectful correction and a classroom culture that does not

shame mistakes. Such practices are not separate from academic instruction. They are the foundation that allows academic instruction to become possible.

5.3 Teacher Empathy, Trust and Relational Teaching

The third theme concerns the role of teacher empathy and positive teacher-student relationships. Humanistic theory places strong emphasis on the teacher as a facilitator of growth. The teacher's role is not limited to delivering content. The teacher creates the emotional and relational conditions in which learning can occur. This is particularly important in special education because students with special educational needs may rely heavily on teacher consistency, patience and sensitivity.

Özkan (2025) found that teachers' cultural intelligence and trust in students were related to their pupil control ideology in multicultural classrooms. This finding is relevant because it shows that teacher beliefs influence classroom practice. Teachers who trust students are more likely to adopt humanistic and supportive approaches, while teachers who lack trust may be more likely to use controlling or custodial practices. In special education, this distinction is crucial because control-based responses may suppress behaviour without addressing the needs that underlie it.

Friesen and Cuning (2020) showed that pre-service teachers' implicit beliefs about inclusive education can be made explicit through reflection. Their study suggests that teacher preparation is not only about learning strategies but also about examining beliefs. This is important because inclusive and humanistic teaching begins with how teachers see learners. If teachers believe that students with special educational needs are capable of growth, they are more likely to design supportive learning opportunities. If they view such students mainly through deficit or difficulty, their teaching may become limited.

Teacher empathy does not mean lowering expectations. Rather, it means understanding the learner's condition while still supporting progress. A humanistic teacher maintains expectations, but these expectations are realistic, compassionate and individualised. The teacher recognises effort, celebrates small achievements and provides scaffolding when students struggle. This is particularly important for students who may not show progress in conventional ways.

Relational teaching also helps build trust. For many students with special educational needs, trust is a condition for participation. A student may be more willing to attempt communication, join group work or accept feedback when the teacher is perceived as safe and supportive. In this sense, the teacher-student relationship becomes part of the teaching strategy itself.

5.4 Motivation, Self-Esteem and Student Participation

The fourth theme relates to motivation, self-esteem and participation. Humanistic theory argues that learners are more likely to engage when they feel valued, capable and connected to the learning process. For students with special educational needs, motivation may be affected by previous failure, low confidence, social exclusion or limited autonomy. Therefore, teaching strategies should be designed to help students experience success and develop a positive sense of self.

Dharin and Rohmad (2022) directly examined humanistic approaches in relation to independent learning among students with disabilities. Their study is highly relevant because it demonstrates how a humanistic learning environment can support independence. The emphasis on pleasant learning conditions, student autonomy and meaningful engagement reflects the central principles of humanistic theory. In special education, independence is not only an academic goal but also a life goal. Students need opportunities to make choices, practise responsibility and develop confidence in their own abilities.

Girón-Gamero and Franco-Mariscal (2023) studied an educational game designed to support Grade 9 students with difficulties in learning chemistry. Although the study was conducted

in the context of chemistry education, it is relevant because it shows how game-based and student-centred methods can support students with learning difficulties. The use of engaging and accessible activities reflects a humanistic concern for meaningful learning. When learning activities are enjoyable, concrete and participatory, students who struggle with traditional instruction may become more motivated to participate.

Motivation in special education should not be understood only as a student characteristic. It is also shaped by the environment. A student may appear unmotivated when tasks are too difficult, instructions are unclear, emotional support is limited or the classroom does not offer meaningful success. A humanistic teacher therefore designs learning experiences that allow students to feel competent. This may involve breaking tasks into smaller steps, offering choices, using visual aids, connecting lessons to real-life contexts or allowing alternative ways of responding.

Self-esteem is closely related to motivation. Students who repeatedly experience failure may begin to believe that they are incapable. Humanistic teaching attempts to interrupt this cycle by creating opportunities for achievement. Even small progress matters because it can change how students see themselves. In special education, recognising progress is not merely encouragement. It is a way of building the learner's identity as someone who can learn, improve and participate.

5.5 Dignity, Inclusion and Quality of Life

The fifth theme concerns dignity, inclusion and quality of life. Humanistic theory is deeply connected to the idea that education should affirm the worth of every learner. In special education, this principle has ethical importance. Students with disabilities should not be treated as problems to be managed, but as individuals with rights, aspirations and the capacity for meaningful participation.

Neuman et al. (2024) argued that the humanistic perspective can serve as a 'lighthouse' for understanding quality of life and family quality of life among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This contribution is important because it expands the purpose of special education beyond school performance. Education should support students' broader development, including autonomy, belonging, participation and well-being. From this perspective, the success of special education should not be measured only by test scores or behavioural compliance, but also by the extent to which students experience dignity and quality of life.

Dotson and Hume (2026) discussed the evolution of positive behaviour support and highlighted values such as dignity, inclusion, collaboration and quality of life. This is relevant to humanistic special education because behaviour support should not be based on punishment or control alone. A dignity-oriented approach asks how the environment can be changed to support the learner. It also recognises that behaviour may communicate needs, discomfort or difficulty. Such an approach is more consistent with humanistic theory because it respects the learner's humanity even when behaviour is challenging.

Boyd et al. (2026) contributed to this discussion through their work on rehumanising clinical documentation for disabled children. Although their focus is clinical documentation, the idea of rehumanisation is relevant to education. Documentation, assessment and reporting can sometimes reduce children to labels, deficits or service needs. A humanistic perspective reminds professionals to write, speak and plan in ways that preserve the child's dignity and complexity as a person.

Inclusion, therefore, must be more than placement. A student may be physically present in a classroom but still feel excluded if the student is not accepted, understood or meaningfully involved. Humanistic theory pushes special education to consider whether students truly belong. Belonging is created through relationships, participation, recognition and respect. It requires teachers to design classrooms where diversity is not merely tolerated but valued.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING STRATEGIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The findings of this review suggest several implications for teaching students with special educational needs. First, teachers should design learning around the whole child. This means considering academic ability together with emotional readiness, communication needs, social confidence, sensory profile and personal interests. A humanistic teaching strategy begins with understanding the learner as a person, not merely as a category of disability.

Second, teachers should prioritise emotional safety. Before expecting students to participate fully, teachers need to create a classroom environment where learners feel accepted and secure. This can be achieved through consistent routines, respectful communication, encouragement and non-threatening correction. Emotional safety should be planned intentionally rather than left to chance.

Third, teaching should be flexible and individualised. Students with special educational needs may require different pathways to achieve learning objectives. Teachers can use visual supports, hands-on activities, assistive technology, peer support, simplified instructions, task analysis and alternative assessments. The goal is not to make learning easier in a superficial way, but to make it accessible and meaningful.

Fourth, teachers should use positive and dignity-oriented behaviour support. Behaviour should be understood within context. Instead of focusing only on stopping undesirable behaviour, teachers should identify possible causes and teach alternative skills. This reflects the humanistic belief that students deserve understanding and support, even when their behaviour is difficult.

Fifth, students should be given opportunities for choice and autonomy. Even small choices can strengthen motivation and ownership. For example, students may choose materials, sequence of tasks, preferred learning activities or ways of demonstrating understanding. This is particularly important for students who often experience decisions being made for them.

Sixth, teachers should build strong relationships with students and families. Humanistic special education requires collaboration because students' needs are complex and multidimensional. Teachers, parents, therapists and support staff should work together to create consistent support systems. Boyd et al. (2026) showed that communication among professionals and families can either support or challenge collaboration for disabled children at school.

Finally, assessment should recognise progress beyond academic achievement. In special education, meaningful progress may include improved communication, longer attention span, increased independence, better emotional regulation, greater peer interaction or willingness to attempt new tasks. A humanistic approach values these developments because they reflect the learner's growth as a whole person.

In practical classroom terms, the humanistic approach can be translated into daily routines that are simple but meaningful. For example, a teacher may begin lessons by checking the learner's emotional state, using visual schedules to reduce uncertainty, offering a choice between two activities, praising effort rather than only correct answers, and ending the lesson with a brief reflection on what the learner managed to do. These practices may appear small, yet they communicate to students that their feelings, effort and progress are noticed. For students who have often experienced learning as failure or correction, such practices can gradually rebuild trust and readiness to participate.

Humanistic teaching also requires teachers to interpret curriculum goals in a flexible way. In special education, a learning objective should not be treated as a rigid endpoint that every student must reach in the same manner. Instead, the teacher should identify the essential skill behind the objective and then provide different routes for students to demonstrate progress. A student may show understanding through speech, drawing, gesture, assisted communication, matching, role play or

practical demonstration. This flexibility does not weaken the curriculum; it makes the curriculum more humane and accessible.

Another important implication concerns teacher reflection. A humanistic approach asks teachers to examine their own assumptions about disability, ability and success. Teachers may need to ask whether their expectations are supportive or limiting, whether their classroom language affirms or labels students, and whether their responses to behaviour protect the student's dignity. Such reflection is important because special education is not only shaped by formal policy and curriculum, but also by everyday teacher decisions. When these decisions are guided by empathy, respect and belief in learner potential, the classroom becomes a more inclusive space.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

This review has several limitations. First, it was based only on literature retrieved from Scopus. Although Scopus is a strong academic database, relevant studies from other databases such as Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO or Google Scholar may have been excluded. Second, the review focused on English-language articles published between 2020 and 2026. This helped maintain a recent and focused scope, but it may have excluded older foundational studies and non-English research.

Third, only 13 articles were selected as core sources after screening. These articles were relevant to the review focus, but the number is relatively small. This reflects the fact that recent literature does not always use the exact term humanistic theory, even when it discusses humanistic principles such as dignity, learner-centredness, emotional support and inclusion. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as a thematic review rather than a comprehensive systematic review.

Despite these limitations, the review provides a useful synthesis of how humanistic theory can inform special education practice. It also highlights the continued importance of humanistic values in contemporary discussions of disability, inclusion and learner-centred teaching.

8. CONCLUSION

Humanistic theory provides a robust conceptual foundation for special education by placing human dignity, emotional well-being, self-worth, motivation and individual potential at the centre of the educational process. For students with special educational needs, successful learning extends beyond the provision of adapted instructional strategies. It is equally influenced by the extent to which learners feel accepted, understood, valued and included within the learning environment.

This review demonstrates that the core principles of humanistic theory continue to be reflected in contemporary research through learner-centred education, emotional support, teacher empathy, self-awareness, motivation, positive behaviour support, inclusive pedagogy and quality of life. Collectively, these themes highlight the continued relevance of humanistic theory in challenging deficit-oriented perspectives of disability and promoting a strengths-based approach that recognises students as individuals with unique capabilities, aspirations and developmental potential.

The significance of humanistic theory lies in its capacity to humanise educational practice within special education. Rather than defining students solely in terms of their diagnoses, impairments or intervention requirements, the theory emphasises their identities as individuals with emotions, strengths, preferences, interpersonal relationships and future aspirations. Consequently, effective special education should be characterised by pedagogical practices that are flexible, respectful, responsive and grounded in meaningful teacher–student relationships.

In conclusion, humanistic theory offers both an ethical framework and a practical pedagogical foundation for special education. It informs the development of teaching practices that extend beyond curriculum delivery to foster inclusive learning environments in which students with special educational needs experience a sense of belonging, develop self-confidence, participate meaningfully and realise their full potential. Such an approach not only enhances educational outcomes but also promotes equity, inclusion and lifelong personal development.

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