***Original Research Article***

**"WHEN LEARNING GETS TOUGH: EXPERIENCES OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS HANDLING LEARNERS WITH DIFFICULTY IN APPLYING KNOWLEDGE IN THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION"**

**Abstract**

General education teachers faced major barrier which is the limited institutional support for teachers, which hampers their ability to adopt transformative and inclusive teaching methods. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers in mainstream classrooms as they navigate inclusive practices for learners with special needs. This study is significant as it offers insight into the personal, instructional, and systemic problems of inclusive education, which can inform training programs and policy formulation. This study employed a phenomenological design, using in-depth interviews (IDIs) with selected seven general education teachers in Mati City Division. Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method was used to analyze the data and capture the essence of participants’ experiences. Results revealed three major themes: Experiences in Implementing Inclusive Education in Mainstream Classrooms (emphasizing emotional, instructional, and behavioral challenges), The Emotional Landscape of Inclusive Education (highlighting feelings of empowerment and support systems), and Transformative Practices in Inclusive Education (focusing on adaptive methods, collaboration, and professional growth), additionally, one theme emerged,Experiences in Inclusion Through Personal and Professional Growth. Participants reported feeling initially unprepared but gradually adapted through experience, reflective practice, and stakeholder collaboration. The study concludes that inclusive education is a continuous learning process shaped by both personal commitment and institutional backing. It is recommended that schools provide ongoing training, strengthen support systems, and promote collaborative practices to enhance inclusive education delivery.

*Keywords: inclusive education, general education teachers, lived experiences,*

*teaching strategies, special needs learners*

**INTRODUCTION**

​ The implementation of inclusive practices faces significant challenges worldwide (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). A major barrier is the limited institutional support for teachers, which hampers their ability to adopt transformative and inclusive teaching methods (Aftab et al., 2024).

Research from various countries underscores the pervasive nature of these challenges. In South Africa, teachers reported a lack of support from school administrators as significant obstacles to implementing inclusive education effectively (Mokhampanyane, 2024). Research in India, indicates that many schools fail to appoint special educators and counsellors as mandated, leaving general education teachers without the necessary support to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). In Australia, studies have found that teachers often lack sufficient knowledge and techniques to support children with disabilities (Chow et al., 2023).

Several studies in the Philippines have consistently identified limited institutional support as a significant barrier hindering general education teachers from adopting transformative and inclusive teaching practices. In public schools in District II of Pasig City, teachers and administrators reported inadequate training programs, instructional materials, and financial resources, all of which limited the effectiveness of inclusive education implementation (Javier, 2023). Similarly, many teachers lack sufficient institutional backing to apply inclusive strategies effectively (Cabañero, 2023).

Despite the global and national recognition of the importance of inclusive education, there remains a significant gap in understanding the lived experiences of general education teachers in implementing these practices. While policy frameworks exist, their translation into effective classroom strategies is often lacking due to insufficient institutional support. This gap underscores the urgency for research that delves into the specific challenges faced by teachers, aiming to inform policy and practice that can bridge the divide between inclusive education ideals and classroom realities.

This study explored the lived experiences of general education teachers handling learners with difficulty in applying knowledge in SPED Center City of Mati, Davao Oriental, Philippines for the school year 2025-2026.

This study was anchored in Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory (1991), which posited that adults experience deep learning when they undergo a process of critical reflection triggered by a disorienting dilemma—an experience that challenges their existing beliefs, assumptions, and practices. In the context of general education teachers handling learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms, this theory provided a relevant and insightful lens.



*Figure 1. Paradigm of the Study*

**METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, the researchers presented the research method and procedures to used. It included the research design, the participants and sampling, research instruments, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations.

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers handling learners with difficulty in applying knowledge within inclusive education settings. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of participants’ personal experiences by focusing on the “how” and “why” behind human behavior rather than quantifying data (Tenny et al., 2022). As emphasized by Creswell et al. (2003) and Neubauer et al. (2019), phenomenological research provides a platform for individuals to express their subjective interpretations of a phenomenon. This approach was well-suited to understand how teachers perceive, adapt to, and support learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms. The study involved seven general education teachers, selected through purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria requiring participants to have direct experience teaching learners with difficulty in applying knowledge in inclusive settings. Exclusion criteria filtered out special education teachers and those without such direct teaching experience. This sampling method ensured rich, relevant insights from educators actively engaged in inclusive education (Etikan, 2016). In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted using a semi-structured guide comprising nine expert-validated open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Data collection was guided by ethical clearance from the Society for Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE) and formal permission from relevant school authorities. Participants were fully informed about the study’s purpose, procedures, and their rights, including confidentiality and the freedom to withdraw.

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method, ensuring a rigorous, systematic examination of participants’ narratives. Researchers identified significant statements, formulated meanings, and clustered themes while practicing bracketing to minimize personal bias. An exhaustive description of experiences was developed and validated through member checking, ensuring findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and institutional guidelines. Informed consent was obtained, and strict confidentiality protocols were maintained. The study’s ethical integrity and methodological rigor not only protected participants’ rights but also reinforced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, offering actionable insights for improving inclusive education policies and practices.

**RESULTS**

In this chapter, the findings of the study are presented based on the lived experiences of general education teachers in handling learners with difficulty in applying knowledge in mainstream classrooms. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data were organized according to the three major variables: lived experience, reflective processing, and transformative response, further, one theme emerged, Experiences in Inclusion Through Personal and Professional Growth.

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*Figure 2. Modified Paradigm of the Study*

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| **Major Themes** | **Sub-themes** |
| **Experiences in Implementing Inclusive Education in Mainstream Classrooms** | Insufficient Preparation for Inclusive Pedagogy |
|  | Institutional Gaps and Emotional Disempowerment |
|  | Rigid Curriculum with Limited Flexibility |
|  | Shock and Overwhelm in Inclusive Settings |
|  | Struggles with Classroom Management and Behavior Support |
| **The Emotional Landscape of Inclusive Education** | Emotional Complexity in Inclusive Education |
|  | Stigma Towards LSENs |
|  | Influence of School Stakeholders on Inclusive Practice |
|  | Emotional Conflict and Compassion Fatigue |
| **Experiences in Inclusion Through Personal and Professional Growth** | Evolving Self-Efficacy in Inclusive Classrooms |
|  | Adaptive Instructional Practices |
|  | Emotional Labor and Fulfillment |
|  | Collaboration with Colleagues |
| **Transformative Practices in Inclusive Education** | Adaptive and Inclusive Instructional Strategies |
|  | Equitable Participation and Classroom Belonging |
|  | Transformational Growth through Inclusive Teaching Experiences |

*Table 1. Thematic Analysis*

**Experiences in Implementing Inclusive Education in Mainstream Classrooms**

***Insufficient Preparation for Inclusive Pedagogy.*** The participants’ responses revealed a deep sense of inadequacy and lack of readiness when faced with the challenge of teaching learners with special needs in a mainstream setting. As researchers, we felt a strong sense of empathy and concern for these teachers, who were clearly doing their best despite having limited tools and training. Their honesty highlighted the gap between the ideal vision of inclusive education and the actual classroom realities.

*“In my class, I have 2 learners with behavioral problem and for me dili siya lalim jud mag cater sa ilaha.” – IDI2*

Another participant shared,

*“Sa akoang klase, duna koy 1 ka studyante nga naay autism. I felt so unprepared kay dili pa in ana ka broad akong knowledge when it come sa pag modify and accommodate sa mga needs sa bata.” – IDI4*

***Institutional Gaps and Emotional Disempowerment.*** Participants described feeling disempowered and overwhelmed due to the limited institutional support available during the early stages of implementing inclusive education. As researchers, it was disheartening to hear how passionate teachers struggled alone in the face of systemic limitations. Their narratives spoke volumes about the emotional and professional weight they carry, often with little acknowledgment.

*“Somehow, I felt so disempowered kay limited pa kaayo ang support since bag-o palang mi naga implement ug inclusive education.” – IDI1*

Another participant emphasized,

*“Sa pag handle nako sa mga bata nako especially sa gi mainstream sa akoa, usahay ma feel nako nga dili pako in ana ka empowered kay tungod lisod kaayo e cater ang mga educational needs nila compare sa mga regular students.” – IDI7*

***Rigid Curriculum with Limited Flexibility.*** Teachers reported that while they attempted to address the diverse needs of LSENs, they were often restricted by the rigid structure of the prescribed curriculum. As researchers, we sensed their internal conflict, the need to comply with educational standards while simultaneously wanting to innovate for their students.

*“Usually naga rely lang ko sa unsa nga topic akong e discuss from curriculum guide but the problem ang mag modify sa mga tasks and lessons na para masabtan sa mga learners nga na mainstream sa akoa.” – IDI3*

***Shock and Overwhelm in Inclusive Settings.*** Many teachers shared that their early encounters with inclusive education were marked by feelings of shock and overwhelm. Being suddenly responsible for learners with complex needs, often without prior notice or preparation, left them emotionally and mentally unready. As researchers, we felt the weight of these revelations, the teachers are already carrying heavy workloads, now faced with new challenges that felt both urgent and unsupported.

*“Pagkahibalo nako nga naa diay gi mainstream nga bata sa akoang klase, murag nabigla ko. Wa koy enough idea unsaon siya pag tabang.” – IDI6*

Another participant shared,

*“Wala man jud mi gi prepare sa ani, kalit lang gi inform nga naa koy duha ka special children. Wala koy gibasihan or training.” – IDI1*

***Struggles with Classroom Management and Behavior Support.*** Teachers also reported significant challenges in managing classroom behavior, particularly when learners with special needs exhibited emotional or behavioral difficulties. These situations often disrupted class flow and created stress, especially when teachers lacked training in behavior management. As researchers, we empathized with their frustration, recognizing that the lack of SPED-specific strategies can create tension not only for teachers but also for learners who deserve support tailored to their needs.

*“Lisod kaayo kay naa koy isa ka bata nga mag tantrums, usahay mag hilak or molayas sa room. Di ko kabalo unsa akong buhaton.” – IDI4*

Another teacher noted,

*“Makapressure jud siya kay ang uban bata maapektuhan pud. Gakabuang nako usahay unsaon pag balance sa tanan.” – IDI7*

**The Emotional Landscape of Inclusive Education**

***Emotional Complexity in Inclusive Education.*** Participants shared conflicting emotions in their inclusive teaching journeys. As researchers, we felt both admiration and sorrow. Admiration for their perseverance and sorrow for the emotional burden they carry. Despite feeling a sense of purpose and care for their learners, the frustration with insufficient support stood out.

*“Para sa akoa, although ma feel man nako ang support sa school pero dili pa siya in ana ka enough para ma cater jud tanan educational needs sa bata.” – IDI5*

***Stigma Towards LSENs.*** Teachers noted that social attitudes continue to act as barriers to full inclusion, describing moments when learners with special needs were visibly discriminated against in public spaces. As researchers, we felt the weight of these societal injustices and how they silently creep into the classroom environment. Teachers not only teach—they also advocate, often silently and without recognition.

*“Sa akoang na experience, hesistant pa kaayo ang mga tao to really accept them for instance, naa koy nakita nga bata nga nagbaktas pero kay tungod naa syay disability, galisod siyag pangita ug masakyan pauli sa ilaha.” – IDI6*

***Influence of School Stakeholders on Inclusive Practice*.** Teachers reflected on the role that parents, co-teachers, and administrators play in shaping their inclusive teaching experiences. As researchers, we saw how teachers are not just affected by the learners in front of them, but also by the ecosystem around them. The teachers’ calls for consistency and active involvement reflect a desire for shared responsibility, a sense that inclusion cannot and should not rest on their shoulders alone.

*“Supportive man ang stakeholders sa school sa implementation ang hangyo lang jud nako na maging consistent sila and proactive if naay problema sa skwelahan.” – IDI2*

***Emotional Conflict and Compassion Fatigue.*** While many educators strive to remain empathetic and understanding, some participants shared emotional struggles that stem from constant exposure to the complex needs of learners with special needs. This ongoing emotional labor leads to inner conflict, balancing their compassion with the exhaustion brought by inclusive teaching. As researchers, we empathized with the tone of fatigue embedded in their narratives.

*“Lisod siya sa tinuod kay every day mag think ko unsa napud nga approach akong buhaton para maka cope ang bata, pero kapoy na pud usahay labi na walay support.” – IDI4*

Another participant expressed,

*“Usahay maluya nako, pero kung makita nako ang bata nga naga try jud siya, mubalik akong gana. Pero tinood, emotionally draining pud siya.” – IDI1*

**Experiences in Inclusion Through Personal and Professional Growth**

***Evolving Self-Efficacy in Inclusive Classrooms.*** This subtheme reflects how teachers gradually overcame feelings of fear and inadequacy as they navigated the complexities of inclusive teaching. Their initial lack of preparation was evident, yet they found ways to build confidence through firsthand experiences and observable learner progress. The researchers felt a sense of admiration for the participants’ perseverance and were moved by how their courage and willingness to try, fail, and adjust became the foundation of their teaching growth.

*“Sa una gyud, mura ko’g hadlok kay wala koy klaro nga background sa inclusive education, pero karon naka learn ko gamay-gamay kung unsaon pag adjust sa akong teaching style.” (IDI2)*

Another participant expressed,

*“Lisod siya sa start pero eventually maka feel naka nga naa kay nabuhat nga tama, especially kung makita nimo nga ga respond na ang bata.” (IDI7)*

***Adaptive Instructional Practices.*** The teachers’ ability to creatively adjust their teaching strategies stood out as a strong indicator of their commitment to inclusion. They talked about modifying pacing, grouping learners strategically, and designing individualized tasks to meet varying needs. As researchers, we were both impressed and humbled by the proactive efforts teachers made without formal training or resources.

*“Naga adjust gyud ko sa pacing sa klase, usahay ako silang pa-una buhaton or i-group para naa silay support sa peers.” (IDI3)*

Another participant noted,

*“Ang ako gyud buhat kay maghimo ko’g modified activity para nila kay dili man jud pareha ilang level.” (IDI5)*

***Emotional Labor and Fulfillment*.** Teachers spoke openly about the emotional weight of handling learners with special needs, from moments of pity and exhaustion to rare but powerful feelings of fulfillment. As researchers, we were deeply moved by their honesty—hearing their emotional struggles made the human side of inclusive teaching very real to us.

*“Maluoy ko usahay labi na kung murag lisod na kaayo sa ila pero wala koy choice kundi tudluan gihapon sila.” (IDI4)*

Another participant shared,

*“Pero rewarding pud kaayo labi na kung mu participate na sila or naay progress, mura kog mutuo nga worth it tanan.” (IDI1)*

***Collaboration with Colleagues*.** Despite the lack of formal systems, teachers created their own networks of support by seeking help from fellow educators and SPED coordinators. They demonstrated a quiet determination to build community even when institutional backing was minimal. As researchers, we were encouraged by the spirit of collaboration we witnessed. It gave us hope that even in the face of systemic gaps, teachers find ways to lean on each other, share strategies, and provide mutual support.

*“Naa koy SPED teacher nga suod nako, siya akong pirmi pangutan-on kung unsaon pag approach sa bata.” (IDI6)*

**Transformative Practices in Inclusive Education**

***Adaptive and Inclusive Instructional Strategies.*** Participants spoke of adopting differentiated instruction and seeking collaboration with SPED professionals to better meet the needs of their learners. As researchers, we were deeply encouraged by these responses. They signify not just survival in the face of adversity, but professional growth.

*“Naga differentiated instruction ko sa mga learners nako. Lahi sa regular lagi pud sa bata nga gi mainstream sa akoa.” – IDI3*

Another teacher shared,

*“Naga collaborate ko sa amoang SPED Coordinator para mahatagan ug advise labi na sa pag accommodate sa mga bata.” – IDI5*

***Equitable Participation and Classroom Belonging.*** Teachers emphasized how they strive to create a classroom culture where all learners, regardless of ability, are encouraged to participate. As researchers, we were moved by their unwavering commitment to equity. Their voices remind us that inclusion is not just a policy—it’s a practice lived out in daily classroom routines, through words of encouragement and patient guidance.

*“Still, gina encourage nako akong mga bata nga mag participate without any barriers.” – IDI3*

***Transformational Growth through Inclusive Teaching Experiences.*** Finally, teachers shared how the experience of teaching LSENs has transformed not only their strategies but also their teaching philosophies. As researchers, we found these reflections powerful and inspiring. They highlight how inclusive education is not merely about accommodating students—it’s about reshaping the educator.

*“I realized na dili jud siya lalim and also fulfulling siya nga profession, especially makita nimo ang bata nga gi mainsteam sa imuha nga naay progress.” – IDI6*

**DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the elaboration of themes and subthemes supported with existing literatures.

General education teachers feel unprepared to support learners with special needs (Goddard & Evans, 2018; Robinson, 2017). This lack of preparation is compounded by weak institutional support, where teachers, particularly those new to inclusive settings (Diab & Green, 2024; Agyapong et al., 2022). Furthermore, the inflexibility of the curriculum forces teachers to rely heavily on prescribed standards (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024; Scott & Husain, 2021). The literature also highlights the initial shock and overwhelm many teachers feel when first introduced to inclusive classrooms (Voss & Kunter, 2019; Ainscow, 2020). This is especially evident in their struggles with classroom management and the absence of structured behavior support (Sinclair, 2024).

Teachers in the inclusive education experience a wide spectrum of emotions (Tayco & Motus, 2024; Lindner & Schwab, 2020). This emotional complexity is further intensified by societal stigma toward learners with special educational needs (LSENs), which teachers observe as contributing to learner isolation (Woodcock et al., 2023). The role of school stakeholders—parents, administrators, and co-teachers—also significantly impacts teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices (Lakkala et al., 2021; Wang & Gu, 2021). Moreover, the emotional toll of continuous caregiving in inclusive settings often leads to compassion fatigue (Rauvola et al., 2019; Calandri et al., 2025).

Teachers' evolving self-efficacy aligns with research indicating that higher self-efficacy correlates with more effective inclusive practices and positive attitudes toward inclusion (Gülsün et al., 2023). Adaptive instructional practices observed among teachers reflect their professional agency (Parsons et al., 2017). The emotional labor and fulfillment described by teachers underscore the dual nature of inclusive teaching (Kariou et al., 2021). Lastly, the collaboration among teachers highlight the importance of informal support networks in sustaining inclusive practices, particularly when formal systems are lacking (De Jong et al., 2019).

Teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusive education by adopting adaptive instructional strategies (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Sustaining these inclusive practices requires continuous professional development and adequate resources to support innovation and responsiveness in teaching methods (Henry & Namhla, 2020). In fostering equitable participation and a sense of classroom belonging, teachers promote open dialogue and value each student’s contributions (Monteiro et al., 2021; Rogahang et al., 2024). Moreover, the inclusive teaching experience fosters transformational growth through reflection and continuous learning (Gudeta, 2022). This evolution not only supports learners with special needs but also enriches the overall educational experience for all students (Molina et al., 2021).

Future research should explore longitudinal studies on the development of teacher efficacy and support mechanisms in inclusive education settings to better understand how sustained exposure and intervention shape teaching practices over time. It would also be valuable to examine collaborative models between general and special education teachers to enhance instructional coherence. There is also a need to institutionalize structured mentorship, provide targeted training programs, and encourage reflective teaching practices that support both teacher growth and learner inclusivity.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that policymakers strengthen inclusive education policies by providing adequate funding, clear guidelines, and ongoing training for general education teachers. School administrators should establish structured support systems. Future researchers are encouraged to explore inclusive practices across different regions and learner profiles to deepen contextual understanding. Teachers should be given access to continuous professional development and mentorship to enhance their confidence and adaptive strategies. Lastly, parents and students should be actively involved in inclusive efforts through awareness programs and open communication, fostering a more supportive and empathetic learning environment.

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