

“Elementary Teachers’ Live Experiences in Teaching Learners with Special Needs in Inclusive Classrooms”

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the lived experiences of elementary teachers engaged in inclusive classrooms, focusing on their work with learners with special needs. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with teachers from selected schools in the Philippines, aiming to capture the richness and complexity of their day-to-day professional experiences. The findings reveal that teachers face multifaceted challenges, including limited formal training in special education, inadequate instructional and assistive resources, large and heterogeneous class sizes, and difficulties in meeting the diverse cognitive, social, and emotional needs of learners. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated considerable resilience, resourcefulness, and creativity by implementing adaptive instructional strategies, individualized learning plans, peer support mechanisms, and flexible pedagogical approaches tailored to learners’ unique abilities and readiness levels. Moreover, teachers employed coping strategies that involved collaborative problem-solving with colleagues, proactive engagement with parents, reflective practice, and continuous professional development, highlighting the importance of social and institutional support in sustaining inclusive practices. The study emphasizes that the effectiveness of inclusive education depends not solely on policy mandates but also on teacher preparedness, systemic institutional backing, and active collaboration among all stakeholders, including school leaders, families, and support networks. These findings underscore the critical role of teachers as central agents in translating inclusion policies into meaningful classroom practice while also pointing to the necessity of comprehensive professional development, resource allocation, and supportive school structures to optimize learning outcomes for learners with special needs. Ultimately, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of inclusive education in practice and offers implications for policy, training, and school-level interventions.

Keywords: Inclusive education, special needs learners, elementary teachers, lived experiences, adaptive teaching strategies, educational policy.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a defining commitment in contemporary education because it affirms that every learner, regardless of disability, developmental condition, or learning difference, has the right to quality education within a supportive school environment. Rather than treating difference as a deficit, inclusive education regards learner diversity as a normal condition of schooling and challenges schools to provide equitable access, participation, and meaningful learning opportunities for all. Internationally, this commitment is anchored in the Salamanca Statement, which called on schools to accommodate all children regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. In the Philippine context, this principle is reinforced by Republic Act No. 11650 and by Department of Education policies that seek to establish more accessible and responsive educational programs for learners with disabilities.

For this reason, the lived experiences of teachers deserve careful attention. Recent Philippine studies indicate that inclusive education is widely endorsed in principle but remains difficult to implement consistently in practice. Teachers report challenges related to limited training in inclusive pedagogy, lack of instructional and assistive resources, complex classroom management demands, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate

institutional support. At the same time, they also describe inclusive teaching as professionally meaningful because it fosters empathy, creativity, collaboration, and learner-centered practice (Beltran et al., 2025; Galutera, 2025; Patina & Bolongaita, 2024). These findings suggest that inclusive classrooms are sites of both difficulty and professional transformation.

Despite the growing body of literature on inclusive education, fewer studies have focused specifically on the lived experiences of elementary teachers who directly teach learners with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. Much of the literature emphasizes policy, attitudes, barriers, or broad implementation concerns, but there remains a need for deeper qualitative inquiry into how teachers interpret their day-to-day realities, how they respond to classroom challenges, and how these experiences shape their instructional practices. Understanding teachers' experiences is crucial because it can inform school leadership, teacher preparation, professional development, and policy implementation.

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of elementary teachers in teaching learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms. By examining the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they develop, and the ways these experiences influence their teaching practices, the study aims to contribute to a more grounded understanding of inclusive education in elementary school settings. Ultimately, the findings are expected to support the development of more responsive policies, stronger professional preparation, and more humane and effective classroom practices for inclusive education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructivist Theory, Inclusive Education Theory, and Universal Design for Learning. Taken together, these theories provide a coherent lens for understanding how teachers support diverse learners, respond to classroom complexity, and construct pedagogical practices in inclusive settings.

Social Constructivist Theory

The first theoretical anchor of the study is Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory. Vygotsky argued that learning occurs through social interaction and that knowledge is co-constructed through engagement with teachers, peers, and the learning environment. A central concept in this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development, which refers to the difference between what a learner can do independently and what can be achieved with the support of a more knowledgeable other. In the context of inclusive classrooms, this theory is highly relevant because learners with special educational needs often benefit from guided instruction, peer interaction, and scaffolded learning experiences. Inclusive classrooms create opportunities for learners to participate in shared activities, observe models of behavior and communication, and receive support tailored to their level of readiness. For teachers, Social Constructivist Theory emphasizes the importance of structuring interaction, using collaboration purposefully, and creating learning experiences that enable all learners to engage meaningfully.

Inclusive Education Theory

The second theoretical lens is Inclusive Education Theory, particularly as advanced by Mel Ainscow. This perspective views inclusion not as the simple physical placement of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms but as the deliberate transformation of school cultures, policies, and practices to remove barriers to learning and participation. From this viewpoint, the challenge of inclusion lies not only within the learner but also within the educational system. This theory is central to the present study because it directs attention to the school and classroom conditions that shape teacher experience. When teachers struggle to support learners with special needs, the issue may not be a lack of personal commitment alone; it may also reflect limited institutional support, insufficient resources, weak collaboration, or restrictive classroom structures. Inclusive Education Theory therefore helps frame teacher experiences as products of interaction between individual effort and systemic conditions. It also supports the study's interest in exploring what schools must change to make inclusion more effective and sustainable.

Universal Design for Learning

The third theoretical anchor is Universal Design for Learning, developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology. UDL proposes that instruction should be designed from the beginning to accommodate learner variability rather than relying only on retroactive adjustments after difficulties appear. The framework recommends the provision of multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression so that learners with different strengths, needs, and preferences can access learning more equitably. For elementary teachers in inclusive classrooms, UDL provides a practical instructional framework. It legitimizes the use of varied materials, flexible tasks, differentiated assessments, visual supports, guided routines, and alternative ways for learners to demonstrate understanding. In this study, UDL is especially relevant because it helps explain the coping strategies and instructional adaptations teachers develop in response to the realities of inclusion. It also reinforces the idea that good inclusive practice benefits not only learners with diagnosed needs but all learners in the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

The study is guided by a conceptual research framework based on an Input–Process–Output (IPO) model. The framework begins with the contextual conditions that teachers encounter in inclusive classrooms. These conditions form the inputs of the study and include factors such as limited professional preparation in special education, scarcity of instructional and assistive resources, classroom management demands, and varying levels of institutional and administrative support. These contextual realities shape the process component of the framework, which focuses on the lived experiences of teachers. Within this process dimension, teachers interpret their circumstances, respond to the needs of learners, and develop practical ways of sustaining inclusive classroom instruction. This stage captures how teachers adapt their instructional practices, manage diverse learning needs, and employ coping strategies that enable them to continue supporting learners with special educational needs. The output component of the framework represents the outcomes that emerge from these experiences. These outcomes include refined instructional practices, strengthened professional insight, and recommendations that may contribute to improving the implementation of inclusive education in elementary schools.

Figure 1. Framework of the Study

INPUT	PROCESS	OUTPUT
• Limited training • Lack of resources • Classroom management difficulties • Institutional support conditions	Teachers' lived experiences • Instructional practices • Coping strategies	• Stronger inclusive education implementation
Input →	Process→	Output

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of elementary teachers in teaching learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do elementary teachers encounter when supporting learners with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms?
2. What coping strategies do elementary teachers employ to effectively support learners with special educational needs in inclusive settings?

3. How do these experiences influence teachers' instructional practices and classroom management?
4. Based on the findings, what recommendations may be proposed to improve the implementation of inclusive education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has become a central principle in contemporary educational reform because it recognizes that all learners, regardless of disability, difference, or disadvantage, have the right to meaningful participation in quality education. Inclusion is understood not merely as the physical placement of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms, but as the creation of learning environments that reduce barriers, promote belonging, and support academic, social, and emotional development. Deroncele-Acosta and Ellis (2024) states that inclusive schools must address academic, emotional, and social development simultaneously, highlighting well-being, resilience, and engagement as central elements of inclusive learning environments.

Furthermore, international policy frameworks such as UNESCO's position on inclusive education and the Salamanca Statement established the principle that schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic, or other conditions. This allows every child to learn regardless of their additional needs and provides resources and support tailored to them (Arias, C. R., et al., 2023).

Additionally, in the Philippine context, inclusive education has been strengthened through various policies and legislative frameworks. Republic Act No. 11650, also known as the Inclusive Education Act, institutionalizes the policy of providing appropriate educational services and support mechanisms for learners with disabilities in the basic education system (Republic Act No. 11650, 2022). Similarly, Department of Education Order No. 44, s. 2021 provides guidelines for the implementation of educational programs and services for learners with disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program (Department of Education, 2021).

In conclusion, inclusive education is not merely about placing learners with disabilities in regular classrooms but about creating supportive learning environments where all learners can participate meaningfully. Moreover, Tampubolon, M., et al., (2024) inclusive classrooms nurture empathy, cooperation, and social awareness among students. When children with diverse abilities learn together, it fosters a more tolerant and compassionate school culture, preparing all students to thrive in a diverse society. Ainscow (2020) states that inclusive education involves transforming school cultures, policies, and practices to eliminate barriers to learning and ensure that all students are valued and supported. This perspective underscores that inclusion is fundamentally an issue of educational equity and social justice

Teachers as Central Agents in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

Teachers occupy a pivotal role in the realization of inclusive education because they translate policy into actual classroom practice, Forber-Pratt et al. (2022). While laws and institutional guidelines establish the framework for inclusion, it is teachers who make daily decisions about instruction, classroom management, learner engagement, and support. Despite support from policies and legislation, many regular schools with an inclusive orientation continue to encounter obstacles, Allam & Martin, (2021). These barriers not only affect student learning but also contribute to teacher stress and burnout. Also, Jardinez & Natividad (2022) stated that many teachers in public elementary schools have not received formal training on inclusive practices, making it difficult for them to adapt instruction for students with special educational needs.

Additionally, the success of inclusive education is closely tied to teachers' knowledge, beliefs, confidence, and practical capacity to work with diverse learners in mainstream settings. Teachers who possess positive attitudes toward inclusion and who feel adequately prepared are more likely to implement inclusive practices effectively (Beltran et al., 2025). They make daily decisions about how to adapt instruction, manage learner diversity, and promote participation among students with special educational needs. As a result, teachers'

experiences, beliefs, and professional capacities significantly influence the quality of inclusive education. Galgao et al. (2025) found that teachers in inclusive classrooms often develop adaptive strategies and reflective practices to support diverse learners. Continuous training and mentoring are therefore essential in helping teachers build competence and confidence in inclusive teaching.

Conversely, Kyamko, V. F. et al., (2024) reported that some teachers still perceive inclusion as an additional burden due to the extra time and energy required to meet diverse needs. Macapaz et al. (2024) found that while teachers in Cebu held moderately positive attitudes toward inclusive education, many also experienced high emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, suggesting that fatigue and stress can overshadow even supportive mindsets. When teachers feel unprepared or unsupported, inclusive education may become difficult to sustain. Many teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to address the complex needs of learners with disabilities or learning difficulties. When teachers lack sufficient training or professional development opportunities, they may experience uncertainty and stress in meeting these expectations (Galutera, 2025). Also, according to Matthews (2024), integrating direct instruction strategies with social constructivist practices can enhance learning outcomes in inclusive classrooms. Such approaches allow teachers to balance structured instruction with collaborative and interactive learning experiences that support diverse learners.

Moreover, these highlight the need to examine teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms more closely. Understanding how teachers navigate these challenges can provide valuable insights into how inclusive education policies can be strengthened and better supported at the school level. This centrality of teachers gives strong support to the present study. If the quality of inclusion is shaped in large part by teachers' day-to-day practices, then understanding their lived experiences becomes necessary for improving policy, teacher development, and school support systems.

Challenges in Teaching Learners with Special Needs in Inclusive Classrooms

Many public elementary school teachers in the Philippines feel inadequately trained to address the diverse needs of learners with disabilities and other special educational needs Javier (2023). Inclusive education in elementary schools is accompanied by a set of recurring implementation challenges. Beltran et al., (2025), the most frequently reported difficulties are overcrowded classrooms, lack of instructional materials, limited assistive resources, inadequate physical space, insufficient administrative support, and the complexity of addressing multiple learning needs simultaneously. Similarly, Madarang and Martin (2024) found that teachers in Diffun District, Quirino, Philippines, reported challenges such as bullying, inadequate facilities, and lack of parental support. These challenges often intensify in public school contexts, where teachers are expected to perform inclusive roles without the level of staffing or material support ideally required.

Similarly, Jabri et al. (2025) reported that teachers frequently experience moderate levels of difficulty in implementing inclusive practices due to insufficient training and limited institutional support. These challenges often arise when policies promoting inclusion are not matched by adequate resources and professional support. Managing behavior, sustaining attention, differentiating tasks, and ensuring participation for all learners require constant adjustment. Learners with special educational needs may require individualized support, while the teacher must still maintain the pace, structure, and social climate of the whole class. Luisen, Vasquez, and Ricaforte (2025) found that classroom environment and management strategies significantly influence learning outcomes in inclusive classrooms.

Næss et al. (2024), In Norway, teachers support inclusion but face practical barriers. Implementing strength-based approach is particularly important. By focusing on strengths rather than limitations, teachers can adapt instruction in ways that directly support inclusive goals.

Another challenge is parental involvement and home-school coordination as important but often weak dimensions of inclusive implementation. When communication with families is limited, teachers may struggle to understand the child's needs fully, monitor progress across settings, or establish consistent support plans. This lack of coordination can increase teacher burden and complicate instructional planning. The present study is therefore well situated within a documented field of concern: teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms are shaped by a combination of pedagogical, institutional, and relational challenges.

Adaptive Instructional Practices and Coping Strategies of Teachers

Despite the challenges associated with inclusive education, teachers often develop innovative strategies to support learners with diverse needs. Azuka et al. (2024) highlight that inclusive instructional design plays a crucial role in supporting neurodiverse learners. Teachers who adopt flexible teaching strategies and learner-centered approaches are better able to address the needs of students with diverse learning profiles. In addition, Ensao et al. (2024) explored that teachers utilized various strategies, such as differentiated instruction, to cater to the diverse needs of students. These responses illustrate that teachers often attempt to bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities through practical innovation. Furthermore, Bagay (2025), teachers in Upper Calanasan District, Apayao employed adaptive strategies such as peer tutoring, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning to address the diverse learning needs of students. The study highlights the importance of professional development and support networks in enhancing teacher effectiveness in inclusive education.

In addition, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework for designing instruction that accommodates diverse learners (Meyer & Rose, 2024). By applying UDL principals, teachers can create learning environments that are more accessible and inclusive for all students through various instructional adaptations such as differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, peer tutoring, scaffolded learning activities, and the use of visual aids or manipulatives. Çibukçiu (2025) highlights the relationship between constructivist approaches and inclusive education, noting that collaborative and interactive learning environments promote deeper understanding and participation among diverse learners. Such approaches allow teachers to facilitate learning experiences that accommodate different levels of ability and encourage peer support.

Moreover, teachers also develop coping strategies to manage the emotional and professional demands of inclusive teaching. These strategies may include seeking support from colleagues, engaging in reflective practice, participating in professional development activities, and maintaining positive relationships with students and parents. Basister, Petersson, and Baconguis (2025) found that teacher collaboration through lesson study promotes innovative teaching methods that support inclusive learning environments. Understanding these strategies can inform teacher training, school-based support, and the design of inclusive interventions that are grounded in actual experience rather than abstract prescription.

Institutional and Parental Support

Inclusive education is strengthened when teachers, parents, school leaders, and other stakeholders work collaboratively. Institutional support is one of the critical factors influencing teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms. According to Sito, L.R. (2020), inclusive education in the Philippines has made progress in policy and advocacy, but teacher preparedness remains a crucial gap. This underscores the importance of comprehensive professional development and institutional support. Effective school leadership, supportive policies, and collaborative school cultures can significantly enhance the implementation of inclusive education. School heads who actively promote fairness, participation, and professional support can create cultures in which inclusive education is treated as a shared responsibility rather than an isolated classroom concern. When teachers receive strong administrative support and collaborative opportunities, they are more confident in implementing inclusive teaching practices.

Similarly, Ainscow (2020) emphasizes that inclusive education requires systemic change within schools. School leaders must foster a culture of collaboration, provide professional development opportunities, and ensure that teachers have access to necessary resources and support systems. Leadership and policy enforcement, inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, and inclusive school culture as three interrelated pillars of successful implementation. These are more likely to sustain inclusive practices when school policies are clear, expectations are shared, and support structures are in place.

Conversely, when institutional backing is weak, teachers may feel that inclusive education rests almost entirely on personal sacrifice and improvisation. Teachers' experiences do not arise only from the presence of learners with special educational needs; they are also shaped by whether the school environment provides resources,

leadership, and professional encouragement. Examining teacher experiences therefore requires attention to the wider school ecology within which inclusive practice occurs.

Additionally, several studies point out that parental involvement in inclusive education remains inconsistent, particularly where families face economic pressures, limited awareness, or uncertainty about how to support the child's learning. Weak stakeholder collaboration can make inclusion more difficult for teachers. Without regular communication with parents and other support people, teachers may lack important contextual information about the learner's needs, routines, or progress. At the same time, teachers may experience emotional strain when they perceive themselves as carrying most of the responsibility for support. This concern is magnified in elementary settings, where close coordination is often crucial for early intervention and consistent educational planning.

Synthesis of Literature

Inclusive education is a rights-based and equity-oriented approach that depends heavily on the actual experiences and capabilities of teachers in mainstream classrooms. Studies consistently document the importance of teacher preparedness, adaptive pedagogy, stakeholder collaboration, school leadership, and institutional support. They likewise identify serious challenges such as inadequate training, lack of resources, classroom management complexity, weak parental involvement, and uneven implementation of inclusive policies in public elementary schools.

At the same time, the literature shows that teachers do not simply endure these conditions. They adapt through differentiated instruction, flexible strategies, professional reflection, emotional resilience, and practical innovation. These responses suggest that teacher experience is a rich site for understanding how inclusion is enacted. Despite the growing body of Philippine research on inclusive education, fewer studies have focused specifically on the lived experiences of elementary teachers who directly teach learners with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms using a qualitative lens.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring how elementary teachers experience inclusive teaching in their everyday practice, what challenges they encounter, what coping strategies they employ, and how these experiences influence their instructional practices. By foregrounding teacher voice, the study seeks to generate context-sensitive insights that can strengthen teacher preparation, school support systems, and the implementation of inclusive education in elementary settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs qualitative phenomenological research design. The choice of phenomenology is deliberate and grounded in the central purpose of the study, which is to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers who teach learners with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms.

Phenomenology is particularly appropriate when the goal of the research is to explore how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences. Rather than measuring variables or testing predetermined relationships, this design seeks to uncover the essence of experience as it is lived and understood by participants. In the context of inclusive education, teachers' experiences cannot be fully captured through numerical indicators or survey responses alone. Their professional realities involve emotions, judgments, adaptations, and reflections that unfold in complex classroom environments.

From a methodological standpoint, the study follows a transcendental phenomenological orientation inspired by the work of Edmund Husserl. This approach encourages the researcher to bracket personal assumptions and attend closely to the voices of participants. Through in-depth interviews and careful thematic analysis, the researcher seeks to identify patterns of meaning that describe how teachers experience inclusive education in practice. By adopting this approach, the study aims to capture the depth and nuance of teachers' experiences,

including the challenges they encounter, the strategies they develop, and the meanings they attach to inclusive teaching.

Research Locale

This study was carried out within the grounds of St. Christine Elementary School, municipality of Lianga, Division of Surigao del Sur. Lianga host several public elementary and secondary schools catering to its diverse population ensuring educational accessibility for all community members. This school was chosen due to their active engagement in implementing inclusive education initiatives. Additionally, this is one of the participating public schools who have SEN learners.

Research Participants

Participants in the study consist elementary teachers in St. Christine Elementary School who have direct experience teaching learners with special educational needs in inclusive classroom settings. Purposeful sampling was used to identify individuals who can provide rich and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

In qualitative phenomenological studies, the emphasis is not on large sample sizes but on depth of experience. Typically, 5 participants are sufficient to generate meaningful descriptions of lived experiences. The final number of participants will depend on the point of data saturation, which occurs when additional interviews no longer yield substantially new insights.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument of the study was a semi-structured interview guide. The guide contains open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses from the participants regarding their experiences in teaching learners with special needs in inclusive education. The questions are aligned with the Statement of the Problem. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for this study because they provide a clear direction for the conversation while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. Hennink et al. (2020) explain that qualitative interviews are designed to understand participants' perspectives and experiences in depth. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) also note that research interviews allow participants to express meanings and interpretations through guided conversation. Although their work is older than the preferred five-year range, it is retained as a reputable and widely used source on qualitative interviewing and is supported by more recent qualitative methodology literature. The interview guide undergoes validation by experts in educational leadership, curriculum implementation, and qualitative research. The validation process ensures that the questions are clear, relevant, appropriate, and aligned with the objectives of the study. Comments and suggestions from the validators are incorporated to improve the content, wording, sequencing, and depth of the questions. After validation, the revised interview guide was used for data gathering. The guide's questions are designed to encourage participants to narrate their actual experiences rather than provide short or fixed responses. Probing questions are also used when clarification or elaboration is needed. This allows the researcher to gather deeper insights and propose recommendations to improve the implementation of inclusive education.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher then distributed a consent letter to the prospective participants, inviting them to participate in the study during their free time and data would be kept confidential. The participants received an explanation of the study's purpose and ethical considerations. Data was gathered primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews in a face-to-face setting. This method allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words while still providing sufficient structure to ensure that the discussion remains aligned with the research questions. Interviews explored areas such as teachers' experiences in supporting learners with special needs, the challenges they encounter, the strategies they develop, and their reflections on inclusive classroom practice. Thereafter, the data were collected, analyzed and interpreted.

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows a phenomenological thematic approach. This tool was used to provide a framework, analyze, identify, and report patterns or themes within data. Thematic Analysis, as a qualitative method requires careful attention to a range of ethical considerations to protect participants.

First, the researcher read repeatedly all interview transcripts to gain familiarity with the participants' accounts. This familiarization stage allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data and understand the overall context of the narratives. Second, significant statements related to the research questions were identified and organized into clusters of meaning. Third, the formulated meanings were organized into clusters of themes through a process of careful reflection and comparison; these clusters were synthesized into broader themes that capture the essence of teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms. The researcher interpreted the participants' statements carefully while remaining close to the original meaning of their words. The final stage of analysis involved developing a rich narrative description that integrates individual perspectives while highlighting common patterns across participants. The exhaustive description was reduced into a fundamental structure that presented the essence of the phenomenon. The final themes were then aligned with the statement of the problem and presented in the results and discussion section.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher practiced bracketing to reduce the influence of personal assumptions. Direct quotations from participants were used in the presentation of findings to support the themes and preserve the authenticity of their voices. The analysis remained grounded in the data and aligned with the research questions.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor of the qualitative findings, the study observes the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria strengthen the quality of qualitative inquiry by ensuring that the findings are grounded in the participants' experiences and that the research process is transparent and auditable. Hennink et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of systematic procedures, transparency, reflexivity, and careful documentation in qualitative research. Campbell et al. (2020) also stress that purposive sampling strengthens qualitative inquiry when participants are selected because of their direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.

Credibility was established using validated interview guide questions, audio recording with consent, verbatim transcription, careful review of transcripts, and the inclusion of direct participant excerpts in the presentation of findings. When necessary, participant clarification is conducted to ensure that responses are accurately understood. These procedures help ensure that the findings reflect the participants' actual meanings and experiences.

Transferability is addressed by providing a clear description of the research locale, participants, inclusion criteria, and sampling procedure. This allows readers to determine whether the findings may be relevant to other districts or schools with similar implementation conditions. The study does not claim universal generalizability because qualitative research values contextual depth over statistical reach. A shocking restraint, but a useful one.

Dependability is ensured by maintaining an audit trail of the research process. This includes copies of approval letters, informed consent forms, interview guide questions, field notes, audio files, transcripts, coding notes, theme development records, and analytic memos. These records document how the study is conducted and how the findings are derived from the data.

Confirmability is strengthened through bracketing, reflexive journaling, and systematic documentation of analytic decisions. The researcher records assumptions, reflections, and methodological decisions throughout the study to minimize bias and ensure that the findings are based on participants' responses rather than the researcher's personal views. This is particularly important in phenomenological research, where the researcher must remain attentive to the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon.

Ethical Consideration

Thematic Analysis, as a qualitative research method, requires careful attention to a range of ethical considerations to protect participants, ensure research integrity and maintain public trust. Ethical consideration was carefully addressed in the study.

Participants in this study received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures and potential risk and benefits and provided written informed consent. Participation is voluntarily and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without facing penalties. The study aimed to avoid harm or discomfort. All procedures were reviewed for appropriateness. Data used solely for research purposes and findings will be report truthfully, respecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Peer debriefing was used to examine emerging themes and minimize researcher bias. In addition, maintaining an audit trail of field notes, transcripts, and analytical decisions will enhance the transparency and dependability of the research process.

Supported by Republic Act No. 10173, an act protecting individual personal information and communication system in the government and the private sector, creating a national privacy commission and other purposes for this purpose.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges, Coping strategies Encounter, Teachers Experiences that Influence Instruction and Management in Inclusive Classroom

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, three major themes emerged from the teachers' responses regarding on the challenges encountered, coping strategies employed, influence on instructional practices and classroom management, and recommendations for improving inclusive education.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Teachers Challenges in Inclusive Classroom

Theme	Implication
Instructional Adjustment	differentiated instruction, visual support strategy, simplified instruction, flexible pedagogy, instructional adaptation
Classroom Condition	Classroom management difficulty, divided attention, large and diverse class, time constraint
Professionally Demanding	Teachers experience inclusive teaching as difficult due to inadequate training, time constraints, and classroom complexity, emotional strain

Instructional Adjustment

The first and most dominant theme is Instructional Adjustment. The participants' responses show that teachers are required to balance whole-class instruction with individualized support for learners with special educational needs.

K2 shared "Sometimes I lacked materials, enough time, and strategies that would fit all learners."

While K3 mention "the lack of time to prepare separate activities"

These responses reveal that instructional adjustment is not simply a preferred teaching strategy but a necessary response to classroom diversity, limited time, and unequal learner readiness. Hu (2024), emphasize that

differentiated instruction is widely used to address students' diverse learning needs, abilities, and interests. It may involve modifying instructional methods, learning content, tools, assessment, and classroom activities to support learner progress. Similarly, Yuen, Luo, and Wan (2023) found that differentiated instruction is useful for addressing diverse learning needs within the same classroom, but teachers still encounter difficulty implementing it in practice. Marchan, Tenerife-Cañete, Añora, and Pinili (2025) Teachers may attempt to differentiate instruction, but overcrowding, lack of materials, and insufficient training make the process difficult, because naturally the system expects one teacher to perform individualized instruction, crowd control, and emotional labor all before lunch.

Classroom Condition

The second theme is classroom condition, where teachers found it difficult to manage heterogeneous class while giving attention to learners with special education needs. This is evident in

K2's statement "One of my biggest challenges was managing the whole class while also focusing on learners who needed more support"

The response resonates with the findings of Lutz, Frey, Rank, and Gebhardt (2024), who emphasized that organizing lessons for heterogeneous learning groups is a major challenge. Effective inclusive classroom management involves adaptive teaching, relationship-building, and behavior management.

The issue of classroom condition is also supported by Manalo (2025), whose study on teachers' readiness, implementation, and management support in inclusive classrooms in Iloilo City found that teachers showed readiness in teaching strategies and addressing diverse learner needs, but challenges remained in curriculum modification and addressing learners' physical needs. Thus, the difficulty becomes greater when the classroom is composed of learners with different abilities, behaviors, learning levels, and support needs. In this context, classroom conditions refer not only to the physical classroom environment but also to class size, learner diversity, classroom management demands, availability of support, and the teacher's capacity to respond to all learners at the same time.

Professionally Demanding

Lastly, the last theme is Professionally Demanding that teachers experience inclusive education as meaningful but demanding, especially because they often feel unprepared to support learners with special educational needs.

K1 states "I felt unprepared because I did not have enough training in handling learners with different needs."

K3 expressed "I felt tired and pressure"

Also, K4 shares that "Insufficient training in handling inclusive education"

The lack of training and limited special education background remains one of the major barriers to effective inclusive education, particularly when general education teachers are expected to handle learners with special needs without sufficient preparation or specialized knowledge. Teachers are not only dealing with instructional and management challenges but also with emotional stress caused by the responsibility of meeting every learner's needs.

The challenge, therefore, is not only pedagogical but also systemic: teachers are willing to support learners with special educational needs, but their ability to do so is limited by insufficient preparation, lack of materials, large and diverse classes, and limited institutional support. Without these, inclusion risks becoming another beautifully worded policy that lands on teachers' desks and quietly explodes.

Table 2. Thematic Summary of Teachers Coping Strategies

Theme	Implication
Adaptation and support-seeking	Teachers use differentiated strategies, communicate with parents, collaborate with colleagues, and pursue self-learning
Teacher's Practice	Experiences in inclusive classrooms develop patience, flexibility, creativity, and learner-centered teaching
Systematic Support	Teachers believe inclusive education becomes effective only with training, materials, and institutional support

Adaptation and Support Seeking

The responses of teachers revealed several recurring themes regarding the coping strategy of teachers in inclusive education, particularly adaptation and support seeking.

K1 stated "I adjusted my teaching by using visual aids, simple instructions, peer support, and differentiated activities."

while K2 emphasized "differentiated activities so that my learners could participate according to their abilities."

This finding is strongly connected to Tomlinson's idea of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes that teachers should respond to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles by adjusting the content, process, products, and learning environment. More recent literature also supports this view. Langelaan et al. (2024) explained that teachers are expected to adapt instruction to meet diverse educational needs through differentiated instruction, while Alnahdi, Lindner, and Schwab (2022) found that inclusive teaching practices such as differentiation and individualization are linked to students' academic, social, and emotional inclusion. Likewise, Liang, To, and Lo (2025) emphasized that teachers develop greater capacity to address learner diversity when they receive professional support, engage in co-planning, and reflect on their instructional practices. These studies support the participants' use of visual aids, simplified instructions, peer support, and ability-based activities as practical coping strategies in inclusive education. In this sense, adaptation and support seeking are not only survival responses to classroom challenges but also essential practices that promote participation, accessibility, and inclusion among learners with diverse needs.

Teachers Practice

The second theme is teachers practice, experiences in inclusive classrooms develop patience, flexibility, creativity, and learner-centered teaching. The participants' responses fit this idea because their strategies, such as differentiated activities, peer support, and flexible teaching, are classroom-based adjustments that allow learners to remain part of the regular learning environment.

K4 shared "I watched YouTube and read articles in handling learners with special needs."

K3 added, "I adjusted my teaching style and flexible activities."

Alnahdi, Lindner, and Schwab (2022) found that inclusive teaching practices are connected to students' emotional inclusion, social inclusion, and academic self-concept, showing the importance of teachers' classroom-based strategies in supporting learners with diverse needs.

Similarly, Sharma and Sokal (2022) emphasized that teachers' self-efficacy influences how they apply inclusive practices, meaning that teachers who believe they can support diverse learners are more likely to adjust their instruction and teaching strategies. Beach et al. (2023) also highlighted that teacher engage in self-

directed online learning to improve their teaching practices, which supports K4's experience of using YouTube and online articles to learn how to handle learners with special needs.

Therefore, teachers' practice in inclusive classrooms reflects continuous adjustment, resourcefulness, and professional growth developed through both classroom experience and independent learning.

Systematic Support

The last theme is systematic support as a coping mechanism.

K1 stated "I also asked help from co-teachers."

K5 added "I communicated with the parents because I want to know more so that I can adjust the teaching and learning of their child."

Teachers often face difficulties in managing learners with different abilities, behaviors, and learning needs; therefore, seeking advice or assistance from colleagues becomes a practical way to strengthen classroom practice. In the same way, communication with parents helps teachers understand learners' behavior, strengths, difficulties, and needs beyond what can be observed inside the classroom.

Juvonen et al. (2023) emphasized that professional development can strengthen teachers' knowledge, skills, and beliefs in implementing inclusive education, showing that teachers need continuing support rather than relying only on personal experience. Similarly, Tan et al. (2025) found that teacher-parent collaboration in inclusive schools contributes to a more supportive learning environment for students with diverse needs. In addition, Li and Wong (2024) highlighted that inclusive education requires a holistic and collaborative approach, where teachers, families, and school communities work together to address learners' academic, social, and emotional needs.

These studies support the idea that effective inclusion depends on shared responsibility, professional collaboration, family involvement, and continuous teacher development rather than the effort of one teacher alone. Therefore, systematic support serves as a coping mechanism that helps teachers respond more effectively to learners with special educational needs while promoting a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

Table 3. Thematic Summary of Teachers experiences influence on instructional practices and classroom management

Theme	Implication
Adaptive Pedagogical Transformation in Inclusive Classrooms	Teachers become more patient, flexible, creative, and observant; they adjust instructional practices and classroom management to accommodate learner diversity; they also recognize that inclusive teaching requires shared support from school, parents, and the education system.
Learner-Centered Adaptation in Inclusive Classrooms	Stress differentiated learning experiences and flexible teaching.
Recognition and Shared Responsibility	support from teachers, parents, school leaders, and the education system.

Adaptive Pedagogical Transformation in Inclusive Classrooms

The findings revealed that teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms significantly influenced their instructional practices and classroom management. This is supported by

K1 “These experiences made me more patient, flexible, and creative. I learned that I should not use only one method because learners are different.”

K2 “I became more patient and observant because I realized that every learner progresses differently

It emphasizes that a single teaching method is not sufficient in an inclusive setting, which prompted to adjust instructional strategies and classroom management practices according to the needs of all learners. Langelaan et al. (2024) emphasized that differentiated instruction requires teachers to adapt their teaching according to learners’ readiness, interests, and learning needs, which aligns with the participants’ realization that learners do not progress in the same way. Similarly, Almalki and Alkahtani (2023) explained that inclusive education encourages teachers to use flexible and responsive pedagogical practices to address learner diversity. In addition, Lindner and Schwab (2020) noted that inclusive teaching requires teachers to adjust instruction, provide support, and create classroom environments where learners with different needs can participate meaningfully. These studies support the idea that inclusive classroom experiences shape teachers into more adaptive, observant, and reflective practitioner.

This is supported by Ainscow (2020), who emphasized that inclusion is strengthened through collaboration, school-level support, and the removal of barriers to participation. Therefore, adaptive pedagogical transformation in inclusive classrooms involves not only changing teaching methods but also developing a collaborative and supportive learning environment where all learners are given opportunities to participate and progress.

Learner-centered Adaptation towards inclusive classroom

The second theme is learner-centered adaptation. Teachers realized that learners have different abilities, progress levels, and learning needs, requiring varied teaching methods. Experiences with learners with special educational needs encouraged teachers to adjust their teaching and classroom management approaches.

K4 stated “the experiences help me to adjust instructional practices and classroom management that best suit to everyone.”

K1 added that “I should not use only one method because learners are different.”

K2 noted that “every learner progresses differently”

These emphasized from one-size-fits-all instruction and toward more responsive, adaptive, and inclusive classroom practices. Alnahdi, Lindner, and Schwab (2022), inclusive teaching practices contribute to students’ academic, social, and emotional inclusion, showing that teachers’ classroom strategies play an important role in helping diverse learners participate meaningfully. This supports the participants’ realization that learners do not progress in the same way and therefore should not be taught using only one method. In addition, Gheysens et al. (2025) described differentiated instruction as an internationally recognized approach for addressing diverse abilities in classrooms and promoting inclusive education. These affirm that learner-centered adaptation is essential in inclusive classrooms because it allows teachers to respond to individual differences, support learner participation, and create teaching practices that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to learners’ needs.

Recognition and Shared Responsibility

The last theme is support and shared responsibility where inclusive education cannot succeed without support.

K3 pointed that “inclusive education cannot succeed through the teacher’s effort alone. There must be support from the school, parents, and the education system.

K1 mentioned that experiences made them “more patient, flexible and creative”

These statements show that inclusive education influenced teachers' personal and professional growth. A teacher may adjust instruction, observe learner progress, and manage the classroom carefully, but these efforts are limited when the school and system do not provide enough support.

This is supported by Booth and Ainscow's Index for Inclusion, which presents inclusion as a school-wide process involving inclusive cultures, policies, and practices. Their work emphasizes that inclusion is not only about placing learners with special educational needs inside regular classrooms; it requires the whole school to identify barriers, build participation, and create supportive learning environments

Recent literature also supports this view. McLinden et al. (2022) emphasized that inclusive education requires a whole-education approach where collaboration among teachers, school leaders, families, and other stakeholders is necessary to address learners' diverse needs. Similarly, Li and Wong (2024) argued that inclusive education should be understood through a holistic framework because learners' academic, social, and emotional needs cannot be addressed by teachers alone. In addition, Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Grygiel (2022) highlighted that effective inclusion depends on school-level practices, teacher support, and positive attitudes toward learners with special educational needs. These studies support the participants' recognition that inclusion is a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden placed only on teachers.

Therefore, recognition and shared responsibility refer to teachers' awareness that inclusive education requires both personal commitment and systematic support. Teachers may become more patient, flexible, and creative through experience, but their efforts must be supported by school policies, parent involvement, professional collaboration, and adequate educational resources. Without these forms of support, inclusive education risks becoming another responsibility placed entirely on teachers while the system politely watches from a safe distance, clipboard in hand.

Table 4. Thematic Analysis for stronger Inclusive Education implementation

Theme	Implication
Strengthening Teacher Training and Professional Development	Participants recommended continuous training to help teachers become more prepared in teaching learners with special educational needs
Provision of Adequate Instructional Materials and Resources	Teachers emphasized the need for materials and resources to support learners with special needs
Stronger Institutional, Parental Support and more inclusive learning environment	support from school heads, parents, and the Department of Education. Improving the classroom, instruction, and school environment to make inclusive education more effective

Teacher Training and Professional Development

The participants' responses generated the major theme "Strengthening Inclusive Education Through Training, Resources, and Systemic Support." It reveals what teachers believe must be improved for inclusive education to become more effective and sustainable. Their recommendations clearly show that inclusive education cannot depend only on the personal effort, patience, or creativity of teachers. It requires structured support, adequate preparation, and a school system that actually backs up its own policies, a concept that somehow remains revolutionary.

The first major recommendation from the participants is the need for teacher training and professional development.

K1, K2, and K4 all emphasized that "teachers need more training, particularly in teaching learners with special educational needs and implementing inclusive education."

Juvonen et al. (2023) found that professional development in inclusive education can improve teachers' knowledge, skills, and beliefs, which are necessary for implementing inclusive practices effectively. Similarly, O'Toole and Burke (2024) emphasized that teacher training for inclusive education should connect theory with practice so that teachers can respond more appropriately to the diverse needs of learners with special educational needs. In addition, Mendoza and Heymann (2022) highlighted that inclusive education interventions in low- and lower-middle-income countries often require teacher training, classroom support, and system-level resources to become effective. These studies affirm that teacher training is not an optional activity but a necessary foundation for successful inclusive education.

Provision of Adequate Instructional Materials and Resources

Adequate instructional materials and resources are essential in inclusive classrooms because it enables teachers to apply differentiated instruction, modify learning activities, and respond to learners' individual needs more effectively.

K1 stated that “teachers need more instructional materials,”

while K3 specifically mentioned “the need for materials to support learners with special needs.”

These responses are connected to the fact that even if teachers are willing to adjust instruction, their efforts are limited when they lack appropriate materials. Campado, Toquero, and Ulanday (2023) emphasized that assistive technology can support the teaching of learners with special educational needs by helping teachers address different learning needs and improve learner participation. Similarly, Chan and Hui (2023) found that learning materials for students with special needs should be interactive, flexible, individualized, and simple, which supports the need for instructional resources that are designed according to learners' abilities and needs. In addition, UNESCO (2024) stressed that disability-inclusive education requires accessible teaching and learning materials, as well as adequate teacher support, to ensure that learners with disabilities can participate meaningfully in safe and inclusive learning environments.

Institutional and administrative support

K1 recommended “stronger support from school heads and parents,” while,

K5 called for full support from the Department of Education in providing inclusive classrooms, inclusive instruction, and an inclusive school environment.

The responses show that teachers view inclusive education as a collective responsibility. They do not see themselves as the only people responsible for making inclusion successful. It also points to the importance of building an inclusive learning environment.

DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson (2023) emphasized that school leaders play a transformative role in inclusive education by supporting teachers, building collaborative professional learning environments, and strengthening relationships among staff, students, and parents. Similarly, Tan et al. (2025) found that strong teacher-parent collaboration contributes to a more supportive learning environment for learners with diverse needs, especially when communication, mutual understanding, and active participation are present.

In the Philippine context, recent research on teachers' readiness and management support in inclusive education also stresses the need for collaboration among teachers, support staff, parents, and external agencies to address both academic and socio-emotional needs of learners.

CONCLUSION

The study on the lived experiences of elementary teachers in teaching learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms reveals that inclusive education, while deeply meaningful, remains professionally demanding. Teachers navigate a complex interplay of instructional, managerial, and emotional challenges, including

limited training in special education, insufficient instructional and assistive materials, large and diverse classroom populations, and inconsistent institutional support.

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrate resilience and professional growth through adaptive instructional practices, differentiated strategies, flexible pedagogy, and active collaboration with colleagues and parents. Their experiences foster enhanced patience, creativity, and learner-centered approaches, highlighting the transformative potential of inclusive teaching both for educators and learners.

Moreover, the findings underscore that inclusive education cannot rely solely on individual teacher effort. Effective inclusion is contingent upon systemic support, administrative backing, and collaborative engagement with stakeholders. Inclusive classrooms thrive when teachers' efforts are complemented by structured professional development, school-wide support systems, and active parental involvement.

In essence, inclusive education is both a pedagogical and systemic enterprise: teachers' adaptive practices are critical, but the sustainability and quality of inclusion depend on coordinated institutional, parental, and policy support.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technology in the Writing Process

The author utilized Google Gemini, ChatGPT, and Grammarly solely to improve the manuscript's language and readability. All AI-assisted outputs were independently reviewed and edited by the authors, who exercise full intellectual control and assume complete responsibility for the accuracy and content of the article.

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BIOGRAPHY



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