Embracing Diversity: General Education Teachers' Lived Experiences in Teaching Learners with Special Needs in an Inclusive Setting

Shardeelou J. Sumagang., Noeriette L. Balano

Holy Cross Davao College, Davao City, 8000, Philippines

ABSTRACT

The increasing emphasis on inclusive education has presented general education teachers with the challenge of catering to diverse learning needs, particularly those of learners with special needs. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of general education teachers in teaching learners with special needs in an inclusive setting. Based on constructivist theory, the research underscores how knowledge and teaching practices are co-constructed via genuine, contextualized interactions involving the learners, teachers, and the surrounding community. Employing qualitative research and reflective stories, the research uncovers that teaching students with special needs makes teachers adopt adaptable, person-specific approaches and perceive themselves as more than just teachers, but also as mentors, advocates, and facilitators between school and society. Inclusive education is, by the study's conclusion, a personal and professional experience for teachers, a transformative one that repositions their role and multiplies their effects beyond instructional work.

Keywords: Lived experiences, inclusive setting, social interactions

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education poses a significant challenge for teachers globally, as many feel unprepared to meet the diverse learners. Many teachers are still undertrained and emotionally exhausted by the demands of inclusive teaching, even with continuous improvements (Garcia & Sabio, 2023; Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022). Meanwhile, general education teachers are essential in achieving inclusive education but they encounter difficulties when putting inclusive teaching into practice. While efforts have been made to build teachers capacity, it's still need to equip teachers with competencies for collaborative and differetiated instruction suitable for local contexts (Gonzaga et al., 2024).

These firsthand accounts draw attention to the discrepancy between inclusive education policies and actual classroom realities. Although integrating students with disabilities is a top concern in South Africa, reports suggest that teachers there lack the necessary resources and feel unsupported (Pillay et al., 2022). More than 6 million students in the US get special education services, but teachers say they are not well prepared to deal with a variety of learning requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In the Philippines, a study of Tero and Revalde (2023), found that primary school teachers managing inclusive classrooms face challenges related to teacher preparation. If these challenges faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms are not addressed, these will lead to teacher burnout, reduced instructional quality, and the continued exclusion of learners with special needs.

Despite inclusive education policies, there is a lack of in-depth research on teachers' lived experiences, leaving a critical gap in understanding how these realities impact both teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Garcia & Sabio, 2023; Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022). Without addressing this gap, efforts to improve inclusion risk failing the very learners they aim to support.

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This qualitative study explored and understood the lived experiences of teachers in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs. This research explored into the personal and professional realities of educators who navigate the complexities of inclusive classrooms, including the insights they gain from their practice. Ultimately, the study contributed valuable perspectives that informed educational policy, teacher preparation programs, and community awareness, promoting a more inclusive and supportive lifelong learning environment for all students.

This study explored the lived experiences of teaching learners with special needs in an Inclusive Setting. It makes the assumption that each teacher's distinct experience shapes effective teaching methods and advances a more comprehensive grasp of the realities and difficulties of inclusive teaching. This study makes the assumption that teachers' experiences of inclusion are influenced by contextual factors, including professional development, collaboration with colleagues, institutional support, and resource availability.

This study was anchored in the theory of **Constructivist Theory** Piaget (1976), holds that learning is an active, individual process of creating meaning from events as opposed to passively absorbing knowledge. This theory emphasizes how teachers' knowledge and methods are influenced by their ongoing interactions with a variety of students, classroom difficulties, institutional expectations, and their own introspective practices in the context of inclusive education.
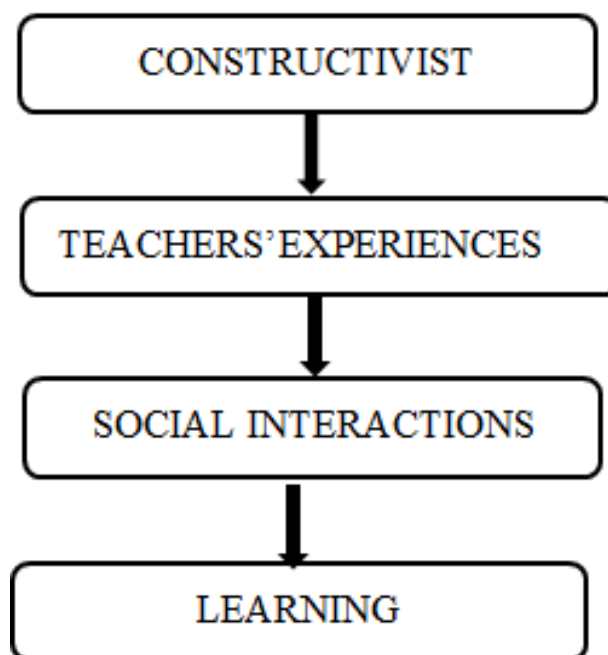
This conceptual paradigm shows that how educators create meaning in inclusive classrooms by drawing on their own experiences and social interactions. The paradigm, which is informed by constructivist theory (Piaget, 1976) focuses on how educators participate in reflective practices, changing their knowledge and methods of instruction in response to actual classroom experiences. The model demonstrates how contextual elements impact inclusive teaching experiences, which in turn impact meaning creation, result in altered teaching methods, and eventually support better inclusive education policies and pedagogies.

METHOD

This qualitative research employed phenomenological research design. Phenomenology study is a qualitative research approach that seeks to explore and understand individual's lived experiences and the meaning they assign to those experiences. According to Ayton (2023), phenomenology is a discipline that aims to comprehend, characterize, and interpret human behavior that focuses on what was experienced and how it was experienced. It deals with the perception or meanings, attitudes and beliefs as well as feelings and emotions. According to Van Manen (2021), phenomenology emphasizes the direct examination of phenomena as they are perceived by consciousness, without the application of preconceived assumptions by the observer.

The research was conducted in schools within the division of Davao City. There were 6 participants who were general education teachers working in inclusive classrooms, teaching or having taught learners with special needs or those students who exhibit manifestations of having learning disabilities. In selecting participants for this study, we used the purposive sampling strategy proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). A maximum variation sampling method employed to represent diverse issues and perspectives about the phenomenon fully. The identified participants of the study are teachers teaching learners with special needs in their respective schools. There were six (6) participants selected for in-depth interviews (IDI). This number of participants is considered eligible and feasible to meet the purpose of the study. According to Creswell (1998), 5 to 15 participants in phenomenological studies suit the standard for such a design. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one year of experience as a teacher teaching learners with special needs.

With the focus of the study on general education teachers' personal and professional perceptions regarding their experiences and challenges, roles and responsibilities, exploring their realities in implementing inclusive education to learners with special needs including the insights they gain from their practice. Interviews and in-depth interviews were used to collect data. Interview questions were semi-structured, with guide questions made by the researchers those participants needed to answer. After the interviews were conducted, the information gathered showed trends and provided suggestions that contributes valuable perspectives that informed educational policy, teacher preparation programs and community awareness promoting a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

The data gathering for this study involves a thorough process designed to obtain rich, detailed information on the lived experiences of teachers in teaching learners with special needs in an inclusive setting. Before the data gathering, a letter of permission to conduct the study was prepared. A permission letter to the school principal signed by the Dean and Professor of the Graduate School. The primary method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews hence the researchers constructed guide questions, validated by the professor of the subject. Initially, potential participants, identified through purposive sampling, was contacted and informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations. After obtaining their consent, interviews were scheduled at a convenient time and location for the participants, ensuring a comfortable and non-disruptive environment. During the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions designed to explore their personal and professional perceptions regarding their experiences and challenges, roles and responsibilities, exploring their realities in implementing inclusive education to learners with special needs including the insights they gain from their practice The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data analysis involves a thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to provide a detailed, nuanced account of the data. The interview content was transcribed verbatim within 24 hour of each interview by the researcher. Transcripts of each participant's interview and the memos were used to analyze the data. The process began with familiarization, where the researcher repeatedly reads the transcripts to become deeply immersed in the data. This followed by generating initial codes to identify significant patterns and features across the data set. Next, the codes were collated into potential themes, which reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflect the participants' narratives and the research questions.

In this study, the participants were identified through purposive sampling, were contacted and informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations. Obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality through pseudonyms and encrypted data storage. Interviews were scheduled at a convenient time and location for the participants, ensuring a comfortable and non-disruptive environment.

RESULTS

The findings from the analysis of the participants' answers are presented in this section. In view of the teacher's lived experiences in teaching learners with Special Needs in an Inclusive Setting, I examine these findings within the framework of the existing body of literature.

Modified Paradigm
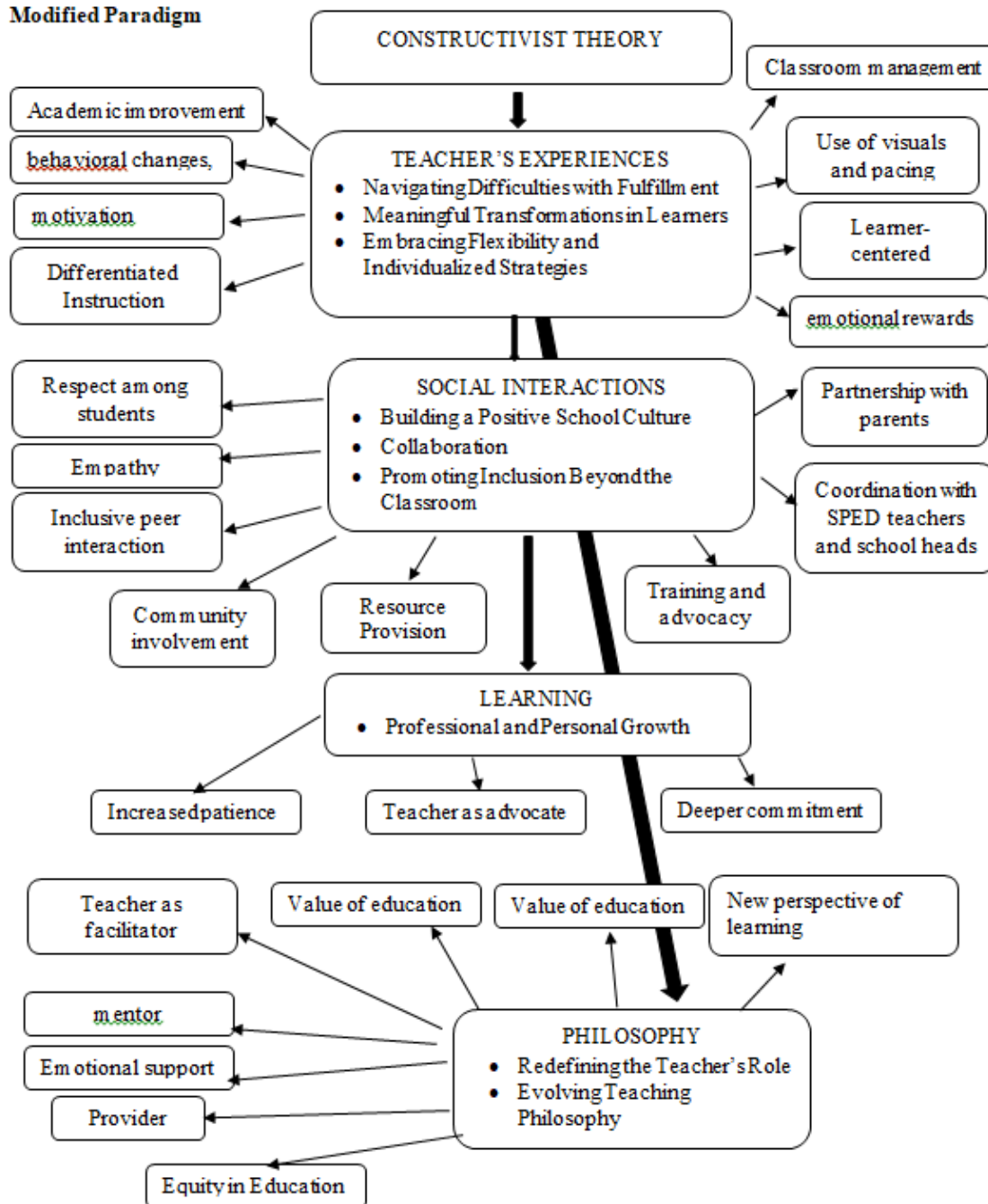
The teachers' experiences also highlighted the significance of the experiences, social interaction and teaching philosophy towards professional learning. This modified paradigm illustrates the interconnected factors shaping a teacher's experiences, social interactions, and philosophy in inclusive education. It also shows how practices such as differentiated instruction, classroom management, and learner-centered teaching result in worthwhile experiences and professional learning. These experiences also promote positive social interactions, for example, collaboration and empathy, which further impact the formation of a teacher's philosophy. Ultimately, it stresses how these factors together reconfigure the teacher's role, foster development and further value-based inclusive education.

Teacher's Experiences

Navigating Difficulties with Fulfillment

Teachers were often faced with managing diverse learners, especially when lacking specialized training. Despite these challenges, many find fulfillment in witnessing student progress and inclusivity in action. I recall how one teacher shared:

"Working in an inclusive classroom has been both rewarding and enriching. I've had the opportunity to teach students with diverse needs, including those with learning disabilities, cultural differences, and varying language proficiencies."

Napakasarap magtrabaho sa isang inclusive classroom. Nagkaroon ako ng pagkakataon na turuan ang mga mag-aaral na may iba't ibang pangangailangan, kabilang ang mga may learning disabilities, with cultural differences, and with various language skills.

Another teacher said:

"Challenging especially in one classroom setting you are handling various types of abilities that challenge you how to deal with it."

"Challenging jud siya especially in one classroom setting na mag handle ug various types of abilities that challenge you how to handle or deal with it."

Meaningful Transformations in Learners

Educators cherish moments when students with special needs exhibit significant academic or behavioral progress, reinforcing the value of inclusive practices. As a teacher in an inclusive classroom,

One teacher said:

"One meaningful moment was when my learners, who struggled at first, gained confidence and started participating more. Watching them progress reminded me why I love teaching".

"Malipay ko pag makita nako ang akong mga learners na naga struggle at first pero karon naka gain na silag confidence and naga participate na sila sa klase. Kato na time nagpa realize sakoa nganong, I love teaching jud hahaha…"

Embracing Flexibility and Individualized Strategies

Teachers adapt their methodologies to cater to individual student needs, employing diverse instructional strategies to foster an inclusive learning environment. A teacher is creative and flexible, which always makes sure that they can adapt to the environment and the differentiated needs of the learners. As one teacher said:

"I adapt my teaching by using differentiated instruction, offering varied materials and activities, and incorporating assistive technologies. I also adjust pacing, provide extra support or scaffolding, and use flexible assessments to ensure every learner can engage and succeed."

"Gina adapt nako sa akong pagtudlo ang differentiated instruction, nagahatag kog different materials and activities, then nagagamit pud mig technology. Naga adjust pud ko sa pacing sa akong pagtudlo sa mga bata. Nagahatag ko ug extra support or scaffolding, then I used flexible assessments to ensure every learner can engage and succeed."

Another teacher said:

"To meet the needs of all learners, I adapt my teaching through differentiation, using a variety of instructional strategies, materials, and assessments. I make sure to provide visual, auditory, and hands-on learning opportunities to accommodate different learning styles."

"To meet the needs of my learners, gina-adapt nako sa akong pagtudlo ang differentiation. Gamit ang nagka lain laing strategy sa pagtudlo, mga materials and pang evaluation pud. I always make sure na I can provide opportunity to my learners for visual, auditory, and hands-on learning and accommodate different learning styles."

Social Interactions

Building a Positive School Culture

Inclusive education contributes to a school culture where diversity is respected, and students develop empathy and collaborative skills. It made me reflect that the cumulative effect of these practices is a school culture where kindness, inclusion, and respect become the norm. Students begin to stand up for one another, offer help when someone struggles, and recognize that success looks different for everyone.

As one teacher said:

"In an inclusive classroom, I see my role as a facilitator of learning, a guide, and a strong advocate for every learner. I strive to create a safe, respectful, and supportive environment where all students—regardless of ability, background, or culture—feel valued and included".

"Para sa akoa ang pagtudlo kay dili lang kay motudlo rajud ko sa mga lessons, especially sa inclusive classroom, kailangan nako silang i-guide ug I support as a facilitator. Ginahimo nako ang tanan na makahimo or ma assure nako nga maka create ko ug safe, respectful and supportive environment for my students. Bisan man sa nagkalain lain nilang ability, asa sila nag gikan or ilang culture ba, ma feel nila nga gipahalagahan sila ug importante sila sa akoa."

Collaboration

Collaboration between parents, teachers, and school heads is vital for a student's success. When these stakeholders work together, they create a supportive network that fosters academic achievement, social growth, and emotional well-being.

As one teacher said:

"Collaboration is a key aspect of my role as an educator, and I work closely with parents, SPED teachers, school heads, and other colleagues to ensure that every student's needs are met. I maintain regular communication with parents to share updates on their child's progress, discuss any concerns, and ensure alignment between home and school support".

Collaboration is a key aspect of my role as an educator charoooot hahah bitaw, ang collaboration kay isa jud mga pinakaimportante sa atong mga maestra. Parehas nako nagapatabang jud ko sa mga parents, SPED teachers, school heads, ug akong mga kauban para masigurado nga ang tanang kailangan or needs sa mga bata kay mahatag gyud. Regular ko makipag istorya sa mga parents sako mga learners para i-share ang updates sa progress sa ilang anak, mastoryahan namo ang mga concerns nila ug nako mahitungod sa ilang anak ug masigurado nako na aligned ang suporta sa balay ug sa eskwelahan."

Another teacher said:

"I collaborate with others by maintaining open communication, sharing insights, and seeking feedback. I work closely with SPED teachers to align strategies, engage parents in regular updates and discussions about student progress, and consult school heads for guidance on resources and policies to support inclusive practices".

"Nagapakitabang jud ko like open communication, sharing insights and seeking feedback. I work closely sa mga SPED teachers para align among strategies na gamiton, makipagstorya pud ko sa mga parents about sa progress sa ilang mga anak, ug naga consult pud ko sa among school head for guidance as well as for resources and policies to support or para suporta sa inclusive practice namo sa school".

Promoting Inclusion Beyond the Classroom

Teachers who practice inclusive education often find that their efforts naturally extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom. A teacher shared that:

"Over time, my understanding of teaching responsibilities has deepened beyond just delivering lessons and meeting academic goals. I've come to realize that being a teacher means being a mentor, advocate, and bridge between the school and the community."

"Over time, akong uderstanding jud sa pagpanudlo kay dili lang purely just delivering the lessons and imeet ang academic goals sa akong mga estudyante. Na realized nako nga mas deeper diay sya. As a teacher, it means mentor ta, advocate ta and bridge ta or tulay ta between the school and the community."

Philosophy

Redefining the Teacher's Role

As education continues to evolve, the role of teachers has transformed significantly. Gone are the days of merely imparting knowledge; today's educators wear many hats. They are facilitators, guiding students through learning experiences that foster critical thinking and problem-solving. They are mentors, offering personalized guidance and support to help students, especially students with special needs navigate their academic journey.

As one teacher said:

"Over time, my understanding of teaching has evolved from simply delivering content to focusing on meeting diverse student needs and fostering a positive, inclusive environment. I've learned that my role extends beyond instruction to include emotional support, flexibility, and collaboration to help all students succeed."

"Sa tinood lang, katong nagsugod ko sakong pagpanudlo, akong na realized nga dili lang puro pagtudlo rajud sa lessons ang akong buhaton. Kailangan pud nakong tutokan ang nagakalain laing needs sa mga bata, to create postive and inclusive environment for them. I've learned that my role extends beyond sa instruction lang. Ako sad dapat iapil ang emotional support, dapat flexible ko then naay collaboration jud para sa kalamboan sa akong mga estudyante."

Teachers have become emotional support providers, creating a safe and inclusive environment where students feel valued and supported. This recognizes that a student's emotional well-being is linked to their academic success.

One teacher said:

"My role in an inclusive classroom is to create a supportive and equitable learning environment, adapt teaching methods to meet diverse needs, and encourage all students to actively participate and succeed. I am a facilitator, guide, and advocate for each student's unique strengths and challenges".

"Sa sulod sa akong room which is inclusive na, ginahimo jud nako ang tanan nga ma feel sakong mga estudyante gud nga pantay pantay jud sila, dapat ang akong pagpanudlo angkop or fit jud siya sa needs sa mga bata and also to encourage nga mo participate actively for them to succeed in the future. I am the facilitator, guide and advocate sa strengths and challenges sa akong mga estudyante."

By embracing their role as facilitators, mentors and emotional support providers, teachers can have a profound impact on their students' lives. Teachers can help students develop a love for learning, build confidence and cultivate essential skills especially to the students with special needs.

Evolving Teaching Philosophy

Engagement in inclusive education prompts teachers to reassess their educational philosophies, emphasizing equity and the unique potential of every learner. As educators become more involved with inclusive education, they tend to undergo a transformation of pedagogical identity seeing themselves not just as teachers but also as guides, champions, and community builders. As one teacher said,

"Over time, my understanding of teaching responsibilities has deepened beyond just delivering lessons and meeting academic goals. I've come to realize that being a teacher means being a mentor, advocate, and bridge between the school and the community".

"Alam mo, dati iniisip ko lang na ang pagtuturo ay tungkol sa pagtuturo ng lessons. Pero habang tumatagal, na-realize ko na mas malaki pa ang role ko bilang guro. Kailangan kong maging mentor, advocate, at tulay sa pagitan ng school at community, kailangan mo silang gabayan, suportahan, at tulungan na lumago."

Learning

Professional and Personal Growth

The inclusive setting fosters both professional development and personal growth, with teachers becoming more patient, empathetic, and committed to their roles. Through continuous learning and reflective practice, teachers refined their teaching practices. Teachers, as advocates, prioritize student's needs, promoting equity and inclusivity. With a deepening commitment to their students' holistic growth; teachers foster a supportive learning environment ultimately shaping the future and the lives of the students.

 One teacher said:

"I would describe my experience working in an inclusive classroom as rewarding and challenging. It provided me with the opportunity to grow professionally and personally. I learned to be more patient, adaptable, and creative in delivering lessons that cater to diverse learning needs. While there were moments of difficulty—especially in managing varied learning styles and behavioral needs—the overall experience strengthened my belief in the importance of equity and inclusion in education"

Ang experience nako sa inclusive classroom kay lisod pero sobra ka rewarding. Nakakuha ko ug opportunity na mo grow professionally and personally. Natun an nako na mas mahimong matiyaga, adaptable, ug creative sa pagtudlo para sa mga mga bata nga naay learning needs. Naay mga panahon nga maglisod jud, pero ang overall experience nako kay nakita nako ang importance of equity and inclusion in education".

Anothe teacher said:

"As a novice kindergarten teacher, my understanding of my teaching responsibilities has evolved over time. I've learned the importance of being flexible, patient, and continuously adapting to meet the diverse needs of my students, especially as I gain more experience in creating an inclusive environment".

"As a baguhan na kindergarten teacher, nag-evolve ang akong understanding sa mga responsibilities nako sa pagtudlo. Natun an nako nga importante na maging flexible, pasensyosa, ug padayon sa pag-adapt sa nagkalain laing needs sa mga bata, labi na karon kay mas daghan nako ug experiences pag abot sa paghandle sa mga mga bata in an inclusive setting or environment".

DISCUSSION

Based on the conversations between the study participants, important themes were identified related to the lived experiences of the general education teachers in teaching learners with special needs in inclusive setting.

*T*eachers were often faced with managing diverse learners, especially when lacking specialized training. Despite these challenges, many find fulfillment in witnessing student progress and inclusivity in action. According to Tayco, C. & Motus, R. (2024) general education teachers often struggle to adapt their instruction to meet the needs of pupils with varying needs among these are insufficient resources, failure to collaborate and communicate with specialists in special education, and inadequate support and training. The research by Sanchez et al. (2021) highlighted that behavioral issues were primary stressors for inclusive teachers. However, they coped using various strategies and found fulfillment in students' positive transformations.

Educators cherish moments when students with special needs exhibit significant academic or behavioral progress, reinforcing the value of inclusive practices. In the study of Wahyuni et al., (2023), differentiated learning approach with different learning models improved student's learning outcomes and enthusiasm for learning. According to the study of Deakin University (2021), experiential learning programs such as those offered by Cottage by the Sea promoted positive change in learners by prompting them to participate in active, socially situated, and personally meaningful experiences. These meet constructivist ideas, specifically the notion that learners construct knowledge from honest, real-world contexts and reflection that leads to resilience and the development of identity.

Teachers adapt their methodologies to cater to individual student needs, employing diverse instructional strategies to foster an inclusive learning environment. According to Hughes (2024), students with learning needs can succeed and the achievement gaps between the general and special education students can be reduced if the teachers can modify their methods of instruction ad assessment. The study of the Times of India (2025), the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India recommended the integration of daily positive affirmations in schools as a flexible and individualized strategy to support students' emotional well-being. This initiative aims to enhance self-confidence and promote emotional resilience, particularly in response to increasing concerns over student mental health.

Inclusive education contributes to a school culture where diversity is respected, and students develop empathy and collaborative skills. Students begin to stand up for one another, offer help when someone struggles, and recognize that success looks different for everyone. According to the study by Lagrimas and Buenaventura (2023), a positive school culture significantly influences student engagement, particularly when mediated by a constructivist learning environment. In the study of Pecson et al., (2023) creating a secure and healthy school environment that promotes student achievement and teacher job satisfaction requires a strong and positive school culture.

Collaboration between parents, teachers, and school heads is vital for a student's success. Teacher-parent collaboration is one of the key factors determining educational outcomes and creative development. Effective teacher-parent collaboration increases academic achievement by supporting learning abilities, social skills and psychological well-being (Qing, 2025). According to Paccaud et al., (2021), good collaboration between families and schools can foster an environment that supports student's academic performance as well as their emotional health.

As education continues to evolve, the role of teachers has transformed significantly. Gone are the days of merely imparting knowledge; today's educators wear many hats. They are facilitators, guiding students through learning experiences that foster critical thinking and problem-solving. They are mentors, offering personalized guidance and support to help students, especially students with special needs navigate their academic journey. In the study of Sankar (2020), teachers that take on a facilitator role help students follow individualized learning paths by using strategies including flexible grouping, assignments and pre-assessment. According to the study of Van Dusen and Otero (2012), the "Streamline to Mastery" program repositions teachers as facilitators and co-constructors of knowledge, central to constructivist pedagogy. Rather than passive recipients of training, teachers lead inquiry, reflect on practice, and collaborate, demonstrating constructivism's emphasis on agency and experiential learning.

Teachers who practice inclusive education often find that their efforts naturally extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Study of Loya (2021), instructional philosophy is an effective tool for developing more inclusive and equitable classroom practices. The research highlighted that through reflective practice, teachers are able to revisit their own beliefs, values, and assumptions regarding teaching and go beyond conventional strategies centered on content instruction and performance. According to Abrol (2020), teachers have a vital role in encouraging engagement, especially to students with difficulties in learning. Though there are some barriers, the roles and duties of the teachers is the only way to overcome the succes of establishing an inclusive schools.

Engagement in inclusive education prompts teachers to reassess their educational philosophies, emphasizing equity and the unique potential of every learner. As educators become more involved with inclusive education,

they tend to undergo a transformation of pedagogical identity seeing themselves not just as teachers but also as guides, champions, and community builders. According to Zhao (2024), a growth mindset can drive teachers' internal power, stimulate their potential and mobilize their enthusiasm for professional growth. Teacher's development includes continuous learning, reflection and team cooperation. According to Ruge et al., (2021) that educators who develop and apply their teaching philosophy identified an association to improved reflective practice, student learning and collegial engagement, as well as opportunities for increased personal resilience and career satisfaction.

According to the conducted study, teacher's lived experiences in teaching learners with special needs in an inclusive setting reveals that it prompts profound professional growth, deepening their roles from content deliverers to advocates, mentors, and community connectors. Grounded in constructivist theory, the data suggest that knowledge and teaching identities are co-constructed through reflection, collaboration, and contextually meaningful experiences. Inclusive environments not only enhance student engagement and empathy but also foster a culture where diversity is celebrated, and equity becomes a shared responsibility.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to further strengthen inclusive education practices and support teacher transformation within the framework of constructivist theory: Educational institutions and governing bodies should provide continuous, context-based training for teachers focusing on inclusive pedagogies, differentiated instruction, and constructivist approaches. These trainings should be experiential and reflective, encouraging teachers to critically examine and evolve their teaching philosophies. Provide adequate learning resources and support services because these resources help address the diverse learning needs of students and reduce the burden on classroom teachers. Also, teachers should be encouraged to design learning experiences that promote active participation, collaboration, and problem-solving. Using constructivist methods enables students to build knowledge through meaningful, real-life contexts, which benefits all learners, particularly those with diverse needs.

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