Embracing Inclusion: Experiences, Challenges and Resilience of Non-Sped Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract— This qualitative study explores the lived experiences, challenges, and resilience of non-special education (non-SPED) teachers working in inclusive classroom settings. As global educational systems increasingly adopt inclusive education models, the role of non-SPED teachers in supporting students with diverse learning needs has become both critical and complex. Through in-depth interviews with non-SPED teachers, the study reveals persistent challenges, including limited training, lack of institutional support, and difficulties in adapting instruction to meet the varied needs of students with disabilities. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated significant adaptability and personal growth, developing creative strategies, empathy, and a deeper commitment to inclusive practices. The findings highlight the transformative potential of inclusive education, not only for students but also for educators. Moreover, the study underscores the urgent need for targeted professional development, emotional and institutional support, and inclusive policy frameworks that empower non-SPED teachers to thrive in inclusive environments. This research contributes to the growing body of international literature advocating for systemic reforms to support inclusive education and teacher well-being.

Keywords— inclusive education, non-SPED teachers, resilience, teacher experiences, educational challenges, teacher development, inclusive classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

One of the arising challenges in providing education for all is the growing recognition of the broad continuum of human needs and the inadequacy of models that constrain educational possibilities by imposing different systems of schooling on those who are in some terms "abnormal" or to use a euphemism "special" (Armstrong, 2020).

In the Philippines, this challenge has long been addressed through the various policies that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities, young people who are out of school, and even adults. As of April 2019, the Department of Education has identified 140 public schools that offer Special Education (SPED) programs. Inclusive education, for the most part, caters to the unique needs and principles of every student, regardless of whether they have special needs or not (Borich, 2016; Abasolo, 2017; Tongson, 2017).

The integration of inclusive education is primary and secondary schools is based on the Department of Education's Order No. 72, series of 2009, also known as "Inclusive Education as Strategy for Increasing Participation Rate of Children." This directive is designed to facilitate the efficient implementation of inclusive education practices throughout schools nationwide. It serves as comprehensive guideline aimed at promoting the rights of learners with special needs and ensuring their complete integration and participation in the Philippine Educational System through the adoption of inclusive education practices. However, it lacks a clear-cut process for the incorporation of learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms (Anderson, 1989; Rink, 2009).

Consequently, various discernible obstacles hinder the successful implementation of inclusive education. These barriers include inadequate teacher training, insufficient provision of necessary tools and equipment for teaching in inclusive classrooms, and the absence of specialized services tailored to marginalized populations to enhance the delivery of inclusive education (Bailey, Nomanbhoy & Tubpun, 2015; Mukherjee & Bear, 2017).

Research in the field of special education has made substantial contributions to both theory and practice, not only for individuals with disabilities but also for learners with all kinds. Nevertheless, in order to enhance pedagogy and foster advancements in special education, ongoing research is essential (Vaughn & Swanson, 2015), as the process of integration is a highly intricate

endeavor that necessitates a departure from conventional methodologies within the framework of a broader educational overhaul.

As observed by the researchers, numerous students with exceptional requirements are instructed by inadequately trained educators and are being integrated into conventional classrooms. This led the researchers to investigate the encounters of general education teachers instructing students with special needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The objectives of inclusive education have undergone significant evolution for children with special needs. Education now transcends mere accommodation by implementing strategies, routines, and materials tailored to the children in the least restrictive environment. It now ensures the complete integration of all learners into the educational community. The notion of inclusion at the beginning of the 21st century ignited intense and conflicting interests among educators and the public. The idea of integrating children with special needs alongside typical children in the general education classroom gained substantial momentum, reshaping the content and status of inclusive education. As inclusion became more prevalent, the role of general education teachers experienced a metamorphosis, ultimately leading to the widespread acceptance of the overarching goal of educating all students with special needs through inclusion (Osgood, 2005 cited by Delacruz, 2020).

Numerous factors influence the concept of inclusive education for students with special needs. Among these factors, the perception and acceptance of regular teachers in an inclusive environment play a crucial role. According to Robbins (2014), a key element in the successful implementation of this policy is the perception and acceptance of those individuals who bear the primary responsibility for its execution. The training and attitudes of regular teachers significantly impact the effectiveness of integrating children with special needs into the general classroom.

Educational placements for children with special needs, such as those with autism, deafness, mutism, ADHD, and Down syndrome, are firmly rooted in Inclusive Education (IE). Established in the 1994 Salamanca Declaration and DepEd Order No. 26, s. 1997, IE is based on the ideology of normalization. Normalization is a systematic process that aims to provide students with special needs the necessary training and opportunities, similar to their typically developing peers. This enables

them to reach their full potential, attain a level of independence in their daily lives, and access and engage in the advantages their community (Arnilla, 2015).

Although the concept of inclusion has gained global recognition, educators exhibit varying responses when it comes to integrating students with special needs into mainstream classrooms. Extensive research has been conducted to examine teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education on a global scale. The outcomes of these studies range from pessimistic to optimistic, influenced by factors such as the economic status of the country, availability of resources, individual child characteristics, and teacher- related variables (Fortain, 2015).

Inclusive Education and Teacher Preparedness

Research has consistently shown that teacher preparedness is a critical factor in the successful implementation of inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2022; Kozleski & Waitoller, 2022). However, many teachers feel unprepared to support students with diverse needs, citing inadequate training and resources (Horne & Timmons, 2022; Loreman, 2023).

A study by Sharma et al. (2022) found that teachers' perceptions of inclusive education were influenced by their training and experience. Teachers who had received specialized training in inclusive education were more likely to hold positive attitudes towards inclusion. Similarly, a study by Kozleski and Waitoller (2022) found that teachers who had participated in professional development programs focused on inclusive education reported increased confidence and competence in supporting students with diverse needs.

Challenges Faced by Non-Special Education Teachers

Non-special education teachers face a range of challenges in implementing inclusive education, including managing diverse student needs, adapting curriculum, and collaborating with support staff (Horne & Timmons, 2022; Loreman, 2023). A study by Horne and Timmons (2022) found that non-special education teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of inclusive education, citing inadequate resources and support.

A study by Loreman (2023) found that non-special education teachers reported difficulty in adapting curriculum to meet the diverse needs of their students. The study suggested that teachers needed additional

training and support to develop the skills and confidence to adapt curriculum effectively.

Studies have highlighted the numerous challenges faced by non-special education teachers in inclusive classrooms. For instance, a study by Humphrey et al. (2022) found that non-special education teachers struggled to adapt their teaching practices to meet the diverse needs of their students. Another study by de Boer et al. (2020) reported that non-special education teachers faced difficulties in managing classroom behavior and providing individualized support to students with diverse needs.

Resilience and Coping Strategies

Despite the challenges faced by non-special education teachers, many teachers demonstrate resilience and coping strategies in the face of adversity (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2022). A study by Kozleski and Waitoller (2022) confirms that teachers who reported higher levels of resilience were more likely to report positive attitudes towards inclusive education. This suggests that resilience is an important factor in enabling teachers to implement inclusive education effectively.

Also, it validates the study of Sharma et al. (2023) that teachers who used coping strategies such as peer support and self-care reported lower levels of burnout and higher levels of job satisfaction. This highlights the importance of coping strategies in enabling teachers to manage their stress and emotions, and maintain their well-being.

Despite the challenges, research has also highlighted the resilience and adaptability of non-special education teachers in inclusive classrooms. A study by Woolfson et al. (2020) back-ups that non-special education teachers developed innovative strategies to support students with diverse needs, such as using assistive technology and adapting instructional materials. Another study by Tekin et al. (2023) reported that non-special education teachers experienced a sense of personal and professional growth when teaching in inclusive classrooms, which was attributed to their ability to develop new skills and knowledge.

The Need for Targeted Support and Professional Development

The literature emphasizes the need for targeted support and professional development for non-special education teachers in inclusive classrooms. A study by Avramidis et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of providing non-special education teachers with training and resources to support their teaching practices in inclusive classrooms. Another study by Campbell et al. (2020) reported that non-special education teachers benefited from collaborative teaching practices and peer support, which helped to reduce their stress and burnout.

The literature review reveals that non-special education teachers often face significant challenges in inclusive classrooms, including managing diverse student needs, adapting teaching practices, and coping with stress and burnout. However, the review also highlights the resilience and adaptability of non-special education teachers, who can develop innovative strategies to support students with diverse needs and experience personal and professional growth. By exploring the lived experiences, challenges, and resilience of non-special education teachers, this study aims to bridge the divide between theory and practice, and provide insights into the complexities of teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Theoretical Lens

Piaget's theory of constructivism (1964) served as a foundation for this inquiry. The theory proposes that individuals cultivate knowledge by connecting their experiences with their ideas. It also emphasizes that learning occurs through active engagement with others and the environment, allowing individuals to derive insights from these interactions. Moreover, Piaget accentuated that learning is an active process where people establish knowledge by relating or connecting their existing perspectives or experiences from newly obtained ideas or insights.

The lens of Piaget's theory of constructivism sheds light on how teachers create meaningful learning opportunities by connecting their knowledge to the various experiences of handling learners with special educational needs. Teachers recognize that LSENs have distinct learning needs; with this understanding, they can leverage their prior knowledge and experience to build new concepts that can aid them with their difficulties in handling LSENs. Moreover, teachers use their experience and prior knowledge to reflect on their practices and adjust based on the responses and feedback from their learners.

In this study, the theory of constructivism provides an insightful framework for understanding general education teachers' lived experiences in handling learners with special educational needs, as it emphasizes that individuals primarily construct knowledge based on their experiences. The theory also underscores the

importance of hands-on experience and the connection between prior and newly acquired knowledge, strengthening the context of this research. Additionally, through the lens of constructivism, this study offers clarity and insight into the challenges teachers face when handling learners with special educational needs.

Research Focus and Questions
1. What are the lived experiences of non-special education teachers in inclusive classrooms at Raul O. V Causing Memorial School and Banate Central Elementary School?
2. What challenges do non-special education teachers face when teaching in inclusive classrooms, and how do they overcome these challenges?
3. How do non-special education teachers demonstrate resilience and adaptability in inclusive classrooms, and what strategies do they use to support students with diverse needs?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and resilience of non-special education teachers in inclusive classrooms at Raul O.V Causing Memorial School and Banate Central Elementary School. Qualitative research, as Creswell (2018) defines it, is an approach that seeks to understand and interpret the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Phenomenology, in particular, is a powerful framework for uncovering the essence of lived experiences, allowing researchers to grasp the intricacies of individual narratives and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Through in-depth interviews, this study captured the stories, struggles, and triumphs of non-SpEd teachers in inclusive classrooms, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of their experiences. The qualitative research design was ideally suited for this investigation, enabling the researcher to gather detailed, contextualized data that shed light on the complexities of inclusive education.

Sampling
The research employed purposive sampling, where respondents were deliberately chosen based on their expertise and familiarity with the subject matter. In this study, participants were selected based on specific criteria, ensuring that they possessed relevant experiences and insights to share. The researchers established a set of criteria, targeting non-Special Education teachers who have worked in inclusive classrooms, thereby providing a rich source of information on the phenomenon under investigation. By carefully selecting participants with similar backgrounds and experiences, the study aimed to gather nuanced and context-specific data that would shed light on the complexities of teaching in inclusive settings. This targeted approach enabled the researchers to tap into the participants' expertise and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Procedures of the Study
This study adhered to stringent ethical considerations, complying with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173) to ensure the protection of participants' rights and welfare. Participants provided voluntary consent through written informed consent, acknowledging their autonomy and willingness to participate. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned codes instead of names, and research data were treated with utmost confidentiality. Prior to the interviews, participants reviewed and signed an informed consent document, signifying their agreement to participate. The study employed a series of four in-depth interviews with each participant, allowing for a longitudinal understanding of their experiences and perceptions. The in-depth interviews, guided by Creswell's (2018) phenomenological approach, enabled the collection of rich and nuanced data. Through these interviews, participants shared their stories, challenges, and triumphs, providing valuable insights into the experiences of non-SpEd teachers in inclusive classrooms. The participants' narratives were analyzed thematically, revealing patterns and themes that contributed to the study's findings. By engaging in reflective dialogue, participants helped co-construct the results, ensuring that their voices and experiences were accurately represented. Throughout the research process, the participants' privacy and anonymity were prioritized, fostering a safe and trustworthy environment. By upholding these ethical standards, the study aimed to generate authentic and meaningful insights into the experiences of non-SpEd teachers in inclusive classrooms.

Findings
The findings of this study are supported by a growing body of international research that highlights the complex realities faced by non-special education (non-SPED) teachers in inclusive classrooms. According to

Deroncele-Acosta and Ellis (2024), teachers consistently report significant challenges in inclusive education, such as managing diverse learning needs, adapting curriculum, and operating within systems that often lack sufficient resources and support.

1. Challenges and Uncertainties

One of the primary findings of this study centers on the pervasive challenges and uncertainties experienced by non-special education (non-SPED) teachers in inclusive classroom settings. Participants reported frequent struggles in adapting their teaching practices to accommodate students with a wide range of learning needs. These challenges were exacerbated by limited training in special education methodologies and a lack of institutional support, leading to feelings of self-doubt and professional inadequacy.

A recurring theme was the uncertainty surrounding how best to support students with complex needs. Many teachers expressed concern over their ability to provide effective and equitable instruction without specialized training:

"I feel like I'm just winging it sometimes, trying to figure out how to support students with complex needs. I'm not always sure if I'm doing the right thing." (Participant 1)

This sense of unpreparedness was compounded by the demands of accommodating diverse conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and physical disabilities:

"I've had students with autism, ADHD, and physical disabilities, and each one requires a different approach. It's hard to keep up and make sure I'm meeting all of their needs." (Participant 2)

Teachers noted that despite their efforts to adapt instruction, the absence of clear guidelines and adequate resources left them unsure of their effectiveness:

"I've tried to adapt my teaching practices to be more inclusive, but it's hard to know if I'm doing enough. I worry that I'm not reaching all of my students." (Participant 3)

"I've had students who require specialized equipment or accommodations, and it's hard to know how to integrate those into my classroom. I feel like I'm learning as I go." (Participant 4)

In addition to pedagogical challenges, participants also highlighted emotional and behavioral difficulties encountered in the classroom. They emphasized the expectation to fulfill roles for which they had no formal training:

"I feel uncertain about how to support students with emotional or behavioral challenges. I'm not trained as a therapist, but sometimes it feels like I need to be." (Participant 5)

"I've tried to differentiate my instruction to meet the needs of all my students, but it's hard to know if I'm doing it effectively. I worry that some students are still falling through the cracks." (Participant 6)

These findings are consistent with recent literature emphasizing systemic shortcomings in inclusive education. Deroncele-Acosta and Ellis (2024) underscore that general education teachers frequently face persistent barriers in inclusive settings, such as inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient access to support services, and difficulties managing heterogeneous learning needs. Similar research points to the complexity of modifying curricula and instructional practices to ensure accessibility for all learners, further complicating teachers' roles (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Sharma et al., 2018).

2. Resilience and Adaptability

Resilience and adaptability are critical competencies for teachers operating within inclusive educational environments. The dynamic and diverse nature of inclusive classrooms demands that educators continuously adjust their teaching approaches, develop innovative strategies, and remain emotionally and professionally grounded amidst ongoing challenges. Current literature emphasizes that teachers who exhibit resilience are significantly more effective in delivering inclusive education (Mansfield et al., 2020; Yada et al., 2022). These educators are more capable of responding to the diverse learning profiles of students and fostering equitable and supportive learning environments.

The findings of this study affirm these insights, revealing that participating teachers consistently demonstrated resilience and adaptability in their instructional practices. Faced with a range of classroom challenges, teachers reported developing creative solutions, adopting flexible teaching approaches, and cultivating a proactive mindset to meet the needs of their students.

One participant shared, "I've learned to think on my feet and come up with creative solutions to support my students. It's amazing what you can do when you're motivated to help your students succeed." (Participant 1). This capacity for immediate problem-solving and improvisation was echoed in another teacher's reflection: "I've developed a 'toolbox' of strategies that I can draw on to support students with different needs. It's taken time and experimentation, but it's worth it to see my students thrive." (Participant 2).

Flexibility emerged as a recurring theme across the interviews. As one teacher stated, "I've learned to be flexible and adapt my plans to meet the changing needs of my students. It's not always easy, but it's necessary to ensure that all my students have access to the curriculum." (Participant 3). This mindset was complemented by a strong belief in personal growth: "I've developed a growth mindset and see challenges as opportunities for growth and learning. This has helped me to stay positive and motivated, even in the face of difficult situations." (Participant 4).

The participants also highlighted the importance of collaborative support. One teacher remarked, "I've learned to seek out support from my colleagues and school administrators when I need it. It's okay to ask for help, and it's often necessary to ensure that my students receive the support they need." (Participant 5). The emotional payoff of overcoming challenges and witnessing student progress was powerfully conveyed by another participant: "I've developed a sense of pride and accomplishment when I see my students succeed, despite the challenges they may face. It's a feeling that's hard to describe, but it's what keeps me going as a teacher." (Participant 6).

These reflections illustrate that resilience and adaptability are not static traits but are cultivated through experience, reflection, and professional support. As Mansfield et al. (2020) and Yada et al. (2022) argue, these qualities are instrumental in fostering inclusive learning environments that are responsive to the unique strengths and needs of all learners.

Therefore, supporting teacher resilience through ongoing training, peer collaboration, and institutional backing is essential for sustaining inclusive education practices on a global scale.

3. Personal and Professional Growth

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of inclusive education not only for students with diverse needs but also for the educators who support them. Participants consistently reported significant personal and professional growth as a result of teaching in inclusive classrooms. Their reflections reveal the profound impact that inclusive educational environments can have on teacher development, including enhanced empathy, creativity, confidence, and adaptability.

For instance, one participant noted, "Teaching in an inclusive classroom has been a game-changer for me. I've learned so much about myself and my students, and I feel like I've grown both personally and professionally." (Participant 1). This sentiment was echoed by another who shared, "I've become a more empathetic and patient person… I've learned to see things from my students' perspectives and to appreciate their unique strengths and challenges." (Participant 2).

Several participants also described how inclusive teaching environments have expanded their instructional repertoire and resilience. One teacher explained, "Teaching in an inclusive classroom has forced me to think outside the box and be more creative in my teaching practices." (Participant 3), while another emphasized growing confidence: "I've learned to trust myself and my abilities, and to seek out support when I need it." (Participant 4).

The experience of developing a growth mindset was also highlighted. As Participant 5 shared, "I've learned to see challenges as opportunities for growth and learning, rather than as threats to my ego or my teaching practices." Finally, the holistic development experienced by educators was encapsulated in this statement: "I feel like I've become a better teacher and a better person… I've learned to appreciate the diversity of my students and to celebrate their unique strengths and talents." (Participant 6).

These reflections align with the work of Kolbina et al. (2023), who emphasize the broader benefits of inclusive education in fostering democratic values, promoting teacher growth, and cultivating a supportive, learner-centered environment. Their research supports the notion that inclusive practices are not solely beneficial for learners with special needs but are equally transformative for educators, contributing to more reflective, empathetic, and responsive teaching.

Collectively, these findings suggest that inclusive education serves as a catalyst for professional transformation. By navigating the challenges and

rewards of inclusive classrooms, teachers develop skills and dispositions that enhance their teaching efficacy and deepen their commitment to equitable education. These insights have important implications for teacher training, policy development, and ongoing professional support in educational systems globally.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have broad implications for teacher education, school leadership, and educational policy on a global scale. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted support and professional development for general education teachers working in inclusive classrooms worldwide. Such support should include comprehensive training in inclusive teaching methodologies, strategies to address the diverse needs of learners, and the integration of adaptive technologies and assistive tools.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of cultivating an inclusive school culture that embraces diversity and encourages collaboration among educators, students, and families. This may involve promoting co-teaching models, ensuring access to inclusive educational resources, and enacting school-wide practices that reflect a commitment to equity and inclusion.

From a policy standpoint, the study highlights the critical role of educational policymakers in designing and implementing inclusive education policies across different educational systems. These policies should address teacher training, equitable resource distribution, and systemic support for students with varying needs.

Importantly, it is essential that general education teachers—who may not have specialized training in special education—receive adequate mentorship and access to necessary tools. With these supports, teachers around the world will be better equipped to meet the needs of all learners, ensuring equitable access to quality education.

In summary, the study's findings advocate for a global commitment to inclusive education. By strengthening teacher preparation, fostering inclusive school environments, and implementing supportive policies, educational systems worldwide can work towards providing all students—regardless of ability or background—with equal opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Non-special education teachers working in inclusive classrooms frequently face significant challenges, often stemming from insufficient training and limited support—both within the school system and from students' home environments. This study offers critical insights into the emotional landscapes and professional experiences of these educators, providing a valuable lens through which the complexities of inclusive teaching can be better understood. By foregrounding the voices of general education teachers, the research serves as an important resource for informing school leadership, educational stakeholders, and policymakers globally.

These teachers are central to cultivating inclusive learning environments that meet the diverse needs of all students. Ensuring their well-being and professional preparedness is fundamental to delivering equitable and high-quality education. To support this, school systems must foster a culture of emotional resilience and well-being, including access to counseling services, mental health resources, and professional support networks. Encouraging self-care and a positive mindset is essential for helping educators manage the emotional and instructional demands of inclusive education.

The implications of this study extend beyond the immediate school context. It offers a roadmap for education ministries, policymakers, and international agencies to design and implement pre-service and in-service training programs tailored to the realities of inclusive classrooms. In particular, the findings call for structured mentorship and sustained professional development initiatives to empower general education teachers prior to their engagement with learners with special educational needs.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education by positioning the experiences of non-special education teachers as a focal point for future inquiry. It lays a foundation for comparative studies, identification of best practices, and evidence-based policymaking. By highlighting the unique challenges and contributions of these educators, it underscores the need for systemic change and sustained advocacy.

Ultimately, this study aims to catalyze a global reevaluation of how inclusive education is approached, supported, and implemented. In doing so, it aspires to influence both policy and practice in ways that ensure

inclusive education is not only a goal but a lived reality for educators and students alike.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this groundbreaking study offers a profound understanding of the lived experiences, challenges, and rewards of non-special education teachers in inclusive classrooms, as well as their invaluable recommendations for enhancing support and training. The findings underscore the imperative need for targeted professional development, a nurturing inclusive school culture, and policies that wholeheartedly promote inclusive education. By shedding light on the complexities of inclusive teaching, this research paves the way for transformative change in educational settings. The study's implications and recommendations for future research serve as a clarion call to prioritize inclusive education, foster a culture of empathy and understanding, and provide tailored support to students with diverse needs. Ultimately, this study empowers educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to collaboratively create inclusive learning environments that unlock the full potential of every student, regardless of their abilities.

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