

The Lived Demands of Inclusion: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experiences and Adaptive Strategies of General Education Teachers Managing Special Needs Education Learners

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ABSTRACT:- This study examined the experiences of General Education Teachers who managed Special Needs Education learners in inclusive classrooms. It addressed the instructional demands they encountered, the meanings they assigned to their experiences, the adaptive strategies they used, the support they valued, and the framework derived from their accounts. The study was guided by Universal Design for Learning, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Inclusive Pedagogy, and phenomenology. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, and 15 General Education Teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. The transcripts were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, including familiarization, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, thematic clustering, exhaustive description, identification of the fundamental structure, and participant verification. The results produced 37 subthemes and 12 themes. Teachers described divided attention, extended preparation, inaccessible materials, assessment difficulties, disruptive behavior, safety concerns, emotional strain, and perceived unpreparedness. They also interpreted inclusive teaching through acceptance, fairness, commitment, reflective growth, and resilience. Their adaptive practices included differentiated and accessible instruction, functional activities, positive reinforcement, calm redirection, peer assistance, independent tasks, enrichment work, and family communication. Significant support came from parents, colleagues, SPED teachers, school leaders, and division personnel, although gaps remained in training, assessment, specialists, materials, technology, funding, and support staff. The study concluded that inclusive teaching required adaptation, shared responsibility, reflection, and institutional assistance. An Adaptive Strategies Framework was developed to guide learner review, instructional adjustment, behavior and participation support, collaboration, professional learning, and school-based assistance. The findings implied that sustainable inclusion depended on teacher preparation, leadership, resources, specialist access, and family participation.

Keywords: *inclusive education, General Education Teachers, Special Needs Education learners, adaptive strategies, phenomenology*

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a continuing priority in ensuring that all learners, including those with Special Needs Education needs, receive meaningful opportunities to participate, learn, and succeed in school. In this context, General Education Teachers play an important role in creating inclusive classrooms and responding to diverse learner needs. However, managing inclusive classrooms may present challenges related to teacher preparation, resources, classroom management, instructional adaptation, and support systems.

This chapter presents the background and context of the study, focusing on the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of General Education Teachers managing Special Needs Education learners. It also discusses research problems, research questions, purpose of the study, scope and delimitations, and definition of key terms. These sections provide the foundation for understanding the need to explore teachers' experiences and develop a context-responsive Adaptive Strategies Framework for inclusive education in Sorsogon City.

Statement of the Problem

This phenomenological study seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of General Education Teachers who manage Special Needs Education learners in inclusive classrooms in the Schools Division of Sorsogon City. It focuses on how participants describe the demands they encounter, how they make meaning of these experiences, and what adaptive strategies emerge from their narratives. The central research question is:

1. How do General Education Teachers describe and make meaning of their lived experiences in managing Special Needs Education learners in inclusive classrooms?
Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:
2. How do General Education Teachers describe the instructional demands they encounter in managing Special Needs Education learners in inclusive classrooms?
3. How do General Education Teachers make meaning of their experiences in responding to the diverse learning, behavioral, and participation needs of Special Needs Education learners?
4. What adaptive strategies do General Education Teachers describe in managing inclusive classroom situations involving Special Needs Education learners?
5. What forms of institutional, collegial, and professional support do General Education Teachers perceive as significant in their inclusive teaching experiences?
6. Based on the themes drawn from the lived experiences of the participants, what Adaptive Strategies Framework may be developed for General Education Teachers managing Special Needs Education learners?

II. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of General Education Teachers in managing Special Needs Education learners in inclusive classrooms in the Schools Division of Sorsogon City. The researcher employed a **qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design** to obtain a careful description and understanding of the experiences of teachers who directly manage learners with additional educational needs. The study focused on the instructional, behavioral, relational, emotional, and institutional demands encountered by the participants, as well as the adaptive practices and support conditions that emerged from their experiences. Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method was used to analyze the data and identify significant statements, formulated meanings, themes, and the shared structure of the participants' experiences.

Purposive criterion sampling was employed to select participants who had direct and meaningful experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The study involved **15 General Education Teachers** from the Schools Division of Sorsogon City. Participants were licensed General Education Teachers assigned to public basic education classrooms, had direct teaching experience with Special Needs Education learners in inclusive classrooms, did not hold a formal degree or specialization in Special Education, and had at least two years of teaching experience. Participation was voluntary and required informed consent. Recruitment continued until the saturation criterion was met, with the final interviews producing repeated meanings without substantially changing the existing thematic structure.

The primary data-gathering instrument was a **semi-structured, in-depth interview guide** aligned with the central research question and specific research questions. The interview guide contained open-ended questions focusing on instructional demands, teachers' meaning-making of their experiences, adaptive practices, significant support, and possible components of an Adaptive Strategies Framework. The guide was reviewed by the adviser and qualified research or field experts for clarity, ethical sensitivity, and alignment with the phenomenological purpose of the study. Each interview lasted approximately **45 to 60 minutes** and was conducted either face-to-face in a private location or online through a secure platform. With the participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded, while field notes were used to document relevant context, nonverbal cues, and preliminary analytic observations.

The data were transcribed **verbatim** and carefully checked against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Participant names and identifying information were replaced with codes, and transcripts were anonymized before analysis. The data were analyzed using **Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological method**, which included familiarization with the transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, development of an exhaustive description, formulation of the fundamental structure, and participant verification. The analysis resulted in **48 significant statements, 37 subthemes, and 12 final themes**, which represented common experiences, adaptive practices, and support conditions described by the participants.

The **Adaptive Strategies Framework** was developed after the phenomenological analysis. Its components were derived from the final themes and fundamental structure rather than predetermined before data analysis. The identified adaptive practices and support needs were organized into areas such as learner review, instructional adaptation, behavior and participation support, shared responsibility, reflective practice, and institutional assistance. The framework was subsequently reviewed for clarity, coherence, and alignment with the findings.

To ensure the rigor of the study, the researcher established **trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability**. Credibility was supported through detailed interviews, neutral probing, repeated transcript review, direct quotations, adviser debriefing, and participant verification. Transferability was addressed through detailed descriptions of the research context and participants.

Dependability was strengthened through consistent interview, transcription, coding, and documentation procedures, while confirmability was supported through reflexive journals, bracketing notes, analytic memos, source-linked coding, participant quotations, and adviser review.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data gathered and analyzed through Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, the following **FINDINGS** were revealed:

1. The analysis of the lived experiences of General Education Teachers managing Special Needs Education learners revealed three major themes concerning instructional demands. These were: **a. Competing Demands on Teacher Attention and Time**, which included split attention across learner groups, extended planning and material preparation, and time, class-size, and lesson-pacing pressure; **b. Disability-Specific Barriers to Access and Assessment**, which included sensory and communication access barriers, curriculum and ability-level mismatch, and alternative assessment and practical-task difficulty; and **c. Unpredictable Behavior, Disruption, and Safety**, which included inattention, wandering, tantrums, emotional outbursts, peer disruption, conflict, safety risks, interrupted lessons, and the need for close supervision.

These findings indicate that General Education Teachers manage multiple responsibilities at the same time while attempting to respond to the individual needs of SNEd learners and maintain the learning progress of the whole class. The teachers experienced divided attention, increased preparation, difficulties in adapting instruction and assessment, and challenges related to behavior and safety. These demands show that inclusive teaching requires more than placing learners in regular classrooms; it requires continuous adjustment of instructional practices and classroom support. The findings are consistent with the discussion that teachers handling learners with special educational needs experience increased classroom responsibilities and divided attention.

2. The second major finding revealed three themes describing how General Education Teachers made meaning of their experiences. These were: **a. Emotional Strain and Perceived Unpreparedness**, characterized by uncertainty, self-doubt, fatigue, stress, anxiety, frustration, role overload, and concern about learner progress; **b. Acceptance, Care, and Equity as Teaching Commitments**, reflected in acceptance, dignity, fair treatment, patience, empathy, compassion, responsibility, and commitment to inclusion; and **c. Reflective Growth and a More Resilient Inclusive Identity**, reflected through learning from classroom experience, self-study, flexibility, resilience, and strengthened professional identity.

The findings suggest that teachers experienced inclusive education not only as an instructional responsibility but also as an emotional and professional journey. While limited preparation contributed to uncertainty and emotional strain, teachers developed stronger commitment to acceptance, fairness, and learner dignity. Through repeated classroom experiences, reflection, and self-directed learning, they gradually developed greater flexibility and resilience. However, the findings also indicate that teacher resilience should not be viewed as a substitute for appropriate training and institutional support.

3. The third major finding identified three adaptive strategies used by General Education Teachers in responding to the needs of SNEd learners. These were: **a. Differentiated, Accessible, and Functional Instruction**, which included task and language simplification, foundational and functional skills, multimodal and accessible learning materials, individualized pacing, activities, and assessment; **b. Calm Behavior Support and Purposeful Participation**, which included calm de-escalation, gentle redirection, positive reinforcement, achievable participation, and calming, interest-based, and role-based activities; and **c. Shared Responsibility for Learning Continuity**, which included buddy and peer assistance, collaborative grouping, independent and enrichment activities, parent communication, and home reinforcement.

The results demonstrate that teachers responded to learner diversity by modifying their instruction, assessment, classroom activities, and behavioral support. They simplified tasks and language, used different forms of learning materials, adjusted pacing, and provided activities suited to learner readiness and functional needs. For behavior concerns, teachers relied on calm redirection, positive reinforcement, and meaningful participation rather than punishment alone. Collaboration with peers, parents, co-teachers, and other personnel also helped sustain learning. These findings indicate that adaptive strategies were developed through practical classroom experience and were strengthened when teachers had opportunities to collaborate and access appropriate support.

4. The fourth major finding revealed three themes concerning the support and institutional conditions experienced by the teachers. These were: **a. Relational Support Through Families, Colleagues, and Leaders**, including cooperative parents, consultation with SPED teachers and co-teachers, administrative encouragement, opportunities, and materials; **b. Uneven Institutional Capacity and Resource Gaps**, including limited or inconsistent formal support, gaps in specialized materials and assistive technology, limited funding, and the need for assessment, therapy, specialists, and support personnel; and **c. Need for Sustained, Practical Professional Learning**, including practical demonstrations, disability-specific skills, continuous mentoring, professional learning, and advance preparation.

The findings show that inclusive education is influenced not only by teachers' personal efforts but also by the availability of institutional and professional support. Teachers value assistance from families, colleagues, SPED teachers, school leaders, and other support providers. At the same time, gaps in materials, assistive technology, funding, specialist services, and personnel created additional challenges. Participants also expressed the need for professional development that is continuous and directly connected to actual classroom situations rather than limited to short or mismatched seminars.

5. The overall findings revealed that General Education Teachers experienced inclusive teaching as a continuous process of adaptation, reflection, collaboration, and support. The analysis generated **48 significant statements, 37 subthemes, and 12 final themes** from the accounts of the 15 participants. The fundamental structure showed that teachers connected learner review, instructional and behavioral adjustment, shared responsibility, reflection, and institutional support in managing inclusive classrooms.

The findings further indicate that inclusive teaching involved simultaneous academic, behavioral, emotional, relational, and organizational responsibilities. Teachers used practical knowledge to adjust tasks, communication, assessment, behavior support, and learner participation. The integration of **Universal Design for Learning, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Inclusive Pedagogy** helped explain how teachers responded to learner differences through accessible instruction, guided participation, collaboration, dignity, and belonging.

6. The findings served as the basis for the development of the Adaptive Strategies Framework. The framework was developed after the phenomenological analysis and was based on the final themes and fundamental structure rather than predetermined categories. The adaptive practices and support needs were organized around learner review, instructional adaptation, behavior and participation support, shared responsibility, reflective practice, and institutional assistance.

The resulting framework presents inclusive teaching as a continuing cycle of **review, action, observation, reflection, and adjustment**. It emphasizes that effective inclusion should not depend solely on the personal resources or endurance of one teacher. Instead, responsibility should be shared among General Education Teachers, SPED personnel, school leaders, families, specialists, and education authorities. The findings therefore highlight the importance of coordinated learner support, accessible instruction, behavior and safety planning, family communication, referral pathways, and sustained consultation between General Education and Special Education personnel.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the revealed findings, the following CONCLUSIONS are drawn.

1. The General Education Teachers experienced inclusive teaching as a combination of instructional, behavioral, and safety demands. Divided attention, access and assessment barriers, unpredictable learner behavior, limited time, class size, scarce materials, and inconsistent specialist assistance contributed to the challenges encountered in managing Special Needs Education learners.
2. The General Education Teachers experienced inclusion through emotional strain, responsibility, care, fairness, and professional growth. Although repeated classroom experience helped them become more reflective, flexible, and adaptable, feelings of uncertainty, fatigue, and stress remained, demonstrating the continuing need for appropriate preparation and support.
3. The General Education Teachers employed adaptive strategies by modifying instruction, assessment, behavior support, and learner participation according to individual needs. Differentiated instruction, accessible materials, functional activities, calm behavioral support, peer assistance, independent tasks, and family communication helped sustain learner participation and classroom learning.
4. The General Education Teachers received valuable support from families, Special Education teachers, colleagues, school leaders, and division personnel. However, gaps in assessment services, specialist assistance, instructional materials, assistive technology, funding, and support personnel indicate the need for more consistent and sustainable institutional support for inclusive education.
5. The findings established that learner review, instructional adaptation, behavior and participation support, shared responsibility, reflective practice, and institutional assistance are interconnected components of inclusive classroom practice. These findings provided the foundation for the development of the **Adaptive Strategies Framework** for General Education Teachers managing Special Needs Education learners.
6. The **Adaptive Strategies Framework** provides a context-responsive guide for supporting General Education Teachers in managing Special Needs Education learners. It emphasizes continuous review, adaptation, collaboration, reflection, and institutional assistance and should be appropriately adapted according to the needs of the learner, teacher, classroom, and school context.

Based on the conclusions drawn, the following **RECOMMENDATIONS** are made.

1. The Schools Division Office and school heads may provide classroom-based SPED training, mentoring, and case consultation for General Education Teachers handling Special Needs Education learners. The training may focus on accessible instruction and assessment, behavior support, safety procedures, and effective family communication.
2. Schools may establish clear assessment and specialist-referral pathways, behavior and safety procedures, and designated personnel who can assist teachers when concerns arise. These procedures may be clearly communicated to teachers and families and regularly reviewed for effectiveness.
3. The Schools Division Office and schools may provide accessible instructional materials, assistive resources, adequate planning time, and appropriate support personnel based on documented learner needs. Resource allocation may consider class size, teacher workload, and the level of support required by learners.
4. School heads may strengthen collaboration among General Education Teachers, Special Education teachers, families, and allied professionals through regular case conferences and shared planning. Peer assistance may be encouraged when appropriate, provided that it remains voluntary, supervised, and limited to safe and suitable tasks.
5. General Education Teachers may be encouraged to engage in continuous professional learning, reflection, and collaboration to strengthen their adaptive strategies in managing Special Needs Education learners and responding to diverse classroom needs.
6. Future researchers may conduct further studies on the implementation of the **Adaptive Strategies Framework** in different educational settings and examine its contribution to teacher practices, learner participation, safety, well-being, and access to appropriate support over time.

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