# Gains and Drawbacks: Integrating Learners with Special Needs in [56] Mainstream Classrooms

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## Abstract

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which stresses adaptable teaching strategies to meet the various needs of every student, serves as the foundation for this study. Ten receiving teachers were selected using a purposive sample technique from the public schools in the Jose Abad Santos 1 District, Division of Davao Occidental, and several themes emerged from their in-depth interviews. The information obtained from the participants' in-depth interviews (IDIs) revealed four (4) major themes: professional development gaps in special education; differentiated instruction and adaptive pedagogical approaches; collaborative ecosystem for inclusive education; and emotional investments and professional resilience. Finally, the key insights gained highlighted the need for systemic change, including increased resources, policy changes, and professional development focusing on both pedagogical skills and emotional intelligence. Effective inclusion requires collaboration among teachers, parents, peers, specialists, and school systems, emphasizing strong communication and shared responsibility for students' support.

*Keywords*: mainstream classrooms; inclusive education; educational planning; experiences; strategies

## 1. Introduction

Mainstreaming students with special educational needs into regular classrooms are a significant educational reform aimed at fostering inclusivity and equal opportunities. However, this approach presents several challenges, particularly for educators who must balance the needs of mainstream learners and those with special needs. Teachers often face difficulties in adapting instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs, managing classroom behaviors, and ensuring equal participation among students. These struggles are further intensified by systemic barriers such as limited resources, insufficient training, and societal attitudes toward disability inclusion (Florian & Spratt, 2019). The need to explore how educators navigate these challenges is crucial in assessing both the benefits and drawbacks of inclusive education, particularly in relation to teachers' coping strategies and their perceptions of maintaining a conducive classroom environment.

Across the world, several countries are grappling with issues related to integrating learners with special needs into mainstream or regular classrooms. In the United States, a 2023 study by the National Center for Learning Disabilities highlighted difficulties in implementing individualized education programs (IEPs) due to limited resources and training for teachers. In the United Kingdom, a 2022 report from the Department for Education raised concerns about the high student-to-teacher ratio, which affects the quality of attention given to learners with special needs. Meanwhile, in Australia, research by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership in 2023 indicated that educators struggle to manage behavioral issues among special needs learners while ensuring that mainstream students also receive adequate academic support. These global challenges highlight the complexities involved in achieving successful inclusion in various educational settings.

In the Philippines, inclusive education faces its own unique set of challenges. First, a 2023 report from the Department of Education (DepEd) revealed a significant lack of trained special education (SPED) teachers, making it difficult to implement effective teaching strategies for learners with special needs. Second, a 2022 study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies found that many public schools lack the necessary facilities and resources, such as assistive technology and accessible

classrooms, to support an inclusive learning environment. Lastly, a 2023 survey by the National Council on Disability Affairs showed that stigma surrounding disabilities remains prevalent, leading to social barriers that hinder the full acceptance and participation of learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms. These issues pose significant obstacles to the full realization of an inclusive education system in the country.

Despite existing policies and efforts to promote inclusion, there remains a research gap in understanding how teachers cope with the challenges of handling diverse learners while maintaining a positive classroom environment. Most studies focus on either the benefits of inclusion or the struggles faced by special needs learners, but limited research explores the experiences and coping mechanisms of teachers who directly implement inclusive education. By addressing this gap, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how teachers navigate the complexities of inclusive classrooms and how these challenges impact the overall learning experience of all students.

Failure to effectively address these challenges can lead to several consequences. Teachers experiencing overwhelming difficulties may face burnout, leading to decreased teaching effectiveness and motivation. Mainstream learners might feel neglected if educators devote excessive attention to learners with special needs, potentially affecting their academic progress. On the other hand, special needs learners may not receive the individualized support they require, resulting in slow developmental progress and social exclusion. Without proper intervention and support, inclusive education may fail to achieve its intended purpose of providing equal learning opportunities for all students.

### *Research Objective*

This research sought to know the gains and drawbacks of integrating learners with special needs in mainstream settings. This study was directed by the following specific objectives.

1. What are your experiences in handling learners with special needs in your class?

2. What are your coping mechanisms to address the challenges of handling learners with special needs?

3. How do you perceive these challenges in maintaining/creating a positive learning classroom environment for both mainstream learners and learners with special needs?

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to examine the gains and drawbacks of integrating learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms, particularly in the context of inclusive education in the Philippines. With the increasing emphasis on inclusive education as outlined in the Department of Education's policies, this study aims to explore teachers' experiences in handling diverse learners, their coping mechanisms in addressing challenges, and their perceptions regarding maintaining conducive learning environments for both mainstream learners and learners with special needs. Specifically, this study seeks to analyze the experiences of teachers in managing learners with special needs within mainstream classrooms, identifying both the benefits and difficulties encountered. It also examines the coping mechanisms employed by educators to address challenges, including instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and support systems utilized and investigate how these challenges impact the creation and maintenance of an inclusive and positive learning environment, considering both mainstream learners and those with special needs.

By addressing these aspects, the study aims to provide insights that will inform school administrators, policymakers, and educators in enhancing inclusive education practices. The findings will contribute to the continuous improvement of teaching strategies, teacher training programs, and support mechanisms to ensure the effective integration of learners with special needs while fostering an equitable and conducive learning environment for all students.

### *Theoretical Lens*

This study is grounded in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which emphasizes flexible teaching approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. UDL, developed by Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2014), promotes multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to ensure that both mainstream and special needs learners can access and participate in the learning process effectively. This framework aligns with the principles of inclusive education by advocating for proactive strategies that support all students, regardless of their abilities. Additionally, this study is informed by the Theory of Inclusive Pedagogy, which encourages teachers to adapt their instructional practices to foster an equitable and supportive learning environment (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). These contemporary theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for understanding how educators address the complexities of inclusive education and ensure the success of diverse learners.

In addition, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Theory of Inclusive Pedagogy offer effective solutions to the challenges of inclusive education. UDL promotes flexible teaching strategies by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, ensuring that all students can access learning in ways that suit their needs. Theory of Inclusive Pedagogy, on the other hand, encourages teaching practices that embrace student diversity rather than focusing on individual deficits.

## 2. Method

*Research Design*

A growing number of qualitative researchers are using case study research, which has a non-statistical goal and does not seek to provide results that can be applied to all populations (Hyett et al., 2014). Thus, the research methodology used in this study was derived from a single case study. A single case study technique involves a thorough analysis of a group, individual, or event using data gathered from multiple factors to produce a generalizable insight (Conde, 2021). Understanding complicated human experiences, motivations, and cultural situations in depth is made possible through qualitative research. A case study is a research design for obtaining detailed, contextualized, and tangible information on a particular real-world topic. It lets you investigate the main features, significance, and implications of the case Through an analysis of the origins of fundamental concepts, behaviors, or outcomes, it offers insights into the nuances of the phenomenon being studied. Researchers can record a wide range of characteristics and interactions with this method that would not be seen with other methods, such surveys or exams. Given that qualitative research is characterized by flexibility, openness and responsibility to context, the steps of data collection and analysis are not as separate and consecutive as they tend to be in quantitative research (Russell, C. K., & Gregory, D. M. (2003).

*Participants and Sampling*

The ten (10) receiving teachers from public schools of Jose Abad Santos 1 District, Division of Davao Occidental, are the research's participants. Ten individuals will be selected through the purposive sample technique to take part in the in-depth interview (IDI). According to Creswell (2013), 10 participants is a suitable quantity for this study, and a fair sample size may vary from 5 to 25 individuals. Purposive sampling allows researchers to selectively choose participants who best represent the research topic, providing targeted insights, depth of understanding, and rich data (Campbell et al., 2020). This suggests that, depending on the context of the study's goals, the researchers will select a sample that will enable them to access the subset of the population of individuals who best fit a given set of criteria.

*Data Gathering*

This case study research ensured the validity, accuracy, and rigor of the material collected by employing a systematic approach to data collecting. The graduate school dean's approval was sought before the research was carried out to establish credibility and confidence, as suggested by L. Grootel and Haven, Van (2019). Each participant provided their informed consent in compliance with the ethics of qualitative research and the recommendations of Cresswell J.W. The number of participants complies with the guidelines that state that a study should only include qualified individuals who can significantly contribute to the achievement of its objectives and that the sample size should be small (Schoch, 2020). According to the research principle that all stages of the data-gathering process must be recorded, a lengthy interview was recorded on audio with the participants' consent, and the transcript was subsequently reviewed (Rutakumwa et al., 2019). By acquiring a member-checking certificate, the study's validity and reliability were verified, ensuring that the participants approved of the results and that the data wasn't misinterpreted during analysis (Candela, 2019).

## 3. Result & Discussions

*3.1 Experiences of Teachers in Handling Learners with Special Needs in a Mainstream Classroom*

This section shows key findings regarding the experiences of teachers handling learners with special needs in a mainstream classroom.

Four (4) main themes have emerged from the data gathered during the participants' in-depth interviews (IDIs), as shown in Figure 1, about the teachers experiences in handling learners with special needs in mainstream classroom, these are the following: Professional development gaps in special education, adaptive pedagogical approaches and differentiated instruction, collaborative ecosystem for inclusive education and emotional investments and professional resilience. Moreover, twelve (12) core values have been identified: lack of formal training, skill-specific deficiencies, classroom management complexity, personalized instructional methods, technology and resource utilization, tailored educational planning, parental engagement, peer support system, integration monitoring, patience and empathy, fulfillment from student progress, and perseverance and consistency.
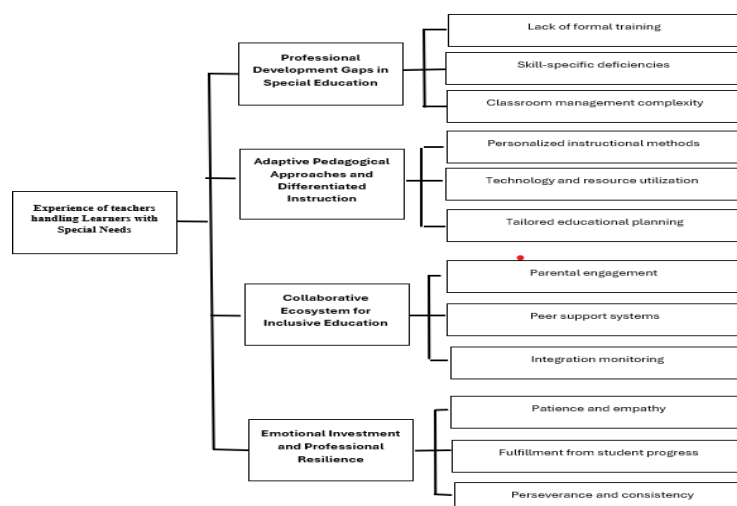
*Figure 1. Experiences Of Teachers in Handling Learners with Special Needs in a Mainstream Classroom*

*3.1.1 Professional Development Gaps in Special Education*

This theme encompasses the widespread lack of preparedness among teachers for handling special needs students, highlighting the urgent need for specialized training, skill development, and support systems that would enable educators to effectively address diverse learning needs. The absence of formal training creates significant barriers to inclusive education and limits teachers' ability to provide appropriate interventions. According to Ritter et al., a prerequisite for qualified educators is that they should be adequately prepared for inclusive education throughout their initial training.

*Lack of formal training*. Teachers consistently express concerns about their lack of formal preparation in special education methodologies. This gap in professional development leaves educators feeling unprepared and sometimes overwhelmed when facing the complex needs of diverse learners. As one teacher directly stated,

> IDI#1: *"Handling learners with special needs in my class is not easy since I don't have formal training on how to address their needs properly and effectively"*

> IDI#5: *"I am currently struggling to effectively teach a deaf student due to a lack of sign language proficiency, highlighting the need further training."*

This sentiment is echoed across multiple interviews, indicating a widespread need for more comprehensive pre-service and in-service training focused specifically on inclusive education practices. According to Mergler et al. Citation2017, 76, pre-service teachers expressed confidence in their ability to differentiate instruction and plan for diversity, and they believed they had the skills and knowledge necessary to respond appropriately to diversity and manage a variety of students with varying needs in their classroom.

*Skill-specific deficiencies*. Beyond general training, teachers identify specific skill gaps that hinder their effectiveness with types of special needs. The challenge of teaching students with sensory impairments without specialized communication skills is particularly evident, as one teacher admits,

> IDI#5: *"I am currently struggling to effectively teach a deaf student due to a lack of sign language proficiency..."*

> IDI#6: *"Additionally managing students with behavioral issues within a general education classroom requires specialized knowledge and strategies."*

IDI#8: *"It takes time for me to let him understand the topic/learnings we have."*

These skill-specific deficiencies create communication barriers that directly impact instructional effectiveness and student outcomes. Teachers recognize that managing behavioral issues and addressing specific learning disabilities requires specialized knowledge they haven't been adequately equipped with. The teacher is the one who engages with the kids that have special educational needs. Therefore, these educators must possess some unique qualities (Ankutse,2019).

*Classroom Management Complexity.* The data highlights how including students with special needs introduces additional classroom management challenges. Teachers must balance attention between students with special needs and typically developing students, sometimes leading to classroom dynamics issues where, as one teacher observed,

> IDI#1: *"...suddenly, one of my learners without special needs seemed to be jealous of the attention I gave to those children with special needs."*

> IDI#3: *"Behavior of these learners are hard to handle since they lack focus and interest."*

> IDI#4: *"...bullying inside the classroom is common however it is manageable."*

This dimension of classroom management requires sophisticated strategies for creating an inclusive atmosphere while ensuring all students receive appropriate attention and support. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about inclusive practices, regularly examine the curriculum, and practice both intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness to create multifaceted climate where all students have a chance to participate fully in the learning process (Salazar et al., 2009).

*3.1.2 Adaptive Pedagogical Approaches and Differentiated Instruction*

This theme captures how teachers are developing and implementing various adaptive strategies including individualized attention, modified materials, technological aids, and personalized learning plans to accommodate diverse learning needs despite limited resources and training. It highlights the creative and flexible approaches educators employ to create inclusive learning environments. The emphasis on personalized methods aligns with Jabbari and Pijl's (2021) finding that effective inclusive teachers prioritize individualization even when facing structural constraints.

***Personalized Instructional Methods.*** Teachers recognize the necessity of individualizing instruction for students with special needs. The interviews reveal a range of personalized approaches, including one teacher who explains,

> *"I have to provide and conduct one-on-one reading sessions and provide reading materials that suit their needs and interests"* (IDI 2).

These personalized methods represent teachers' attempts to bridge the gap between standard curriculum and the specific learning needs of their students. Though time-intensive, teachers prioritize these individualized approaches as essential for student progress. More and more studies have looked at how individualized learning is implemented in daily life. To go from teacher-centered to student-centered and eventually to more student-driven learning through the flexible process of learning, O'Donnell (2021) demonstrated how teachers and students negotiate using several instructional approaches.

***Technology and Resource Utilization.*** The data shows teachers actively incorporating available tools and technologies to support inclusive education. One educator mentioned implementing

> *"Assistive technology such as television, lapel and so on"* (IDI# 6).

This utilization of resources reflects teachers' creativity in maximizing the effectiveness of whatever tools are available to them.

> Notably, teachers also view other students as resources, with one explaining,

> *"I also let other learners help me express my ideas towards him"* (IDI 80

***Tailored Educational Planning.*** A new era of personalized learning is being ushered in by artificial intelligence in education, which enables teachers to use resources like adaptive technologies to meet each student on their individual learning path. Certain parts of an IEP, such assessing student performance, identifying specific needs, and applying evidence-based interventions, can be automated with the use of AI tools (Holmes et al., 2019). With increasing access for learners with widely-varying needs, educational models were developed, going beyond mere accommodations and modifications, toward addressing all students' educational needs through innovative and pro-active instructional design of the general education curriculum (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose & Jackson 2002; Simmons & Kame'enui 1996).

> IDI#6: *"I made a specific plan and strategies"*
> IDI#7: *"We keep going back and forth with the reading lessons..."*

The creative utilization of available resources and technologies reveals teachers' pragmatic approach to inclusion. This aligns with recent research suggesting that technology integration in inclusive classrooms often occurs through teacher initiative rather than systematic implementation (Svensson et al., 2021). The mention of "assistive technology such as television, lapel and so on" demonstrates how teachers repurpose existing tools to support differentiated instruction, a pattern consistent with Anaby et al.'s (2020) observation that resource constraints often spark pedagogical innovation.

*3.1.3 Collaborative Ecosystems for Inclusive Practice*

The emphasis on collaboration as essential to effective inclusion supports a growing consensus in contemporary research. The teachers' active engagement with parents, reflected in statements like "I also asked the parents to provide and support a home reading session," aligns with Kurth et al.'s (2023) finding that parent-teacher partnerships represent a critical factor in successful inclusive education. As Shogren et al. (2021) argue, such partnerships create continuity between learning environments, enhancing skill generalization for students with special needs.

This theme reflects the recognition that effective special needs education requires a collaborative network involving parents, peers, specialists, and school systems working together to support learners. It emphasizes the importance of shared responsibility and coordinated efforts in creating supportive learning environments that extend beyond the classroom.

***Parental Engagement.*** Teachers consistently identify parent involvement as crucial for student progress. The importance of home-school coordination is emphasized by one teacher who stated,

> *"I also asked the parents to provide and support a home reading session"* (IDI 2).

This deliberate effort to extend learning beyond school hours reflects teachers' understanding that consistent practice across environments is essential for skill development in students with special needs. The repeated mention of parental involvement suggests teachers view this collaboration as a necessary component of effective special education.

***Peer Support Systems.*** The interviews reveal how teachers harness the social environment of the classroom to support students with special needs. By encouraging peer assistance, as when one teacher mentioned,

> *"I also let other learners help me express my ideas towards him"* (IDI 8).

Educators create natural support systems that benefit both the students with special needs and their typically developing peers. This approach builds empathy and understanding among students while providing additional support channels for those with special needs.

***Integration Monitoring.*** Teachers engage in ongoing assessment of students' readiness for increased inclusion in mainstream settings. One educator described a student who

> *"Is under monitoring because he is to be included next year in the mainstream class"* (IDI 4).

This systematic observation and evaluation reflect teachers' commitment to progressive inclusion when appropriate, while ensuring students have the necessary skills and support for successful integration. The data suggests teachers value inclusion

but approach it thoughtfully, with careful preparation and monitoring. This perspective aligns with Shogren et al.'s (2021) argument that inclusion should be viewed as a continuum requiring ongoing assessment and adjustment rather than a binary state. McKay et al. (2022) similarly note that effective inclusion requires systematic transition planning to ensure appropriate supports are in place as students move toward less restrictive environments.

### 3.1.4 Emotional Investment and Professional Resilience

The significant emotional investment described by teachers in this study highlights an aspect of inclusive education that merits greater attention in both research and policy. As teachers expressed, effective inclusive practice "takes patience, empathy and willingness," personal qualities that extend beyond technical skills. This finding aligns with Hamilton and Kecskemeti's (2021) observation that inclusive education involves substantial emotional labor that remains largely unacknowledged in professional standards and evaluation systems.

This theme addresses the significant emotional and psychological dimensions of teaching special needs students, highlighting how educators' attitudes, patience, empathy, and resilience directly impact the quality of education they provide. It acknowledges both the challenges and rewards that come with this emotional investment in student success.

***Patience and Empathy.*** Teachers consistently identify patience and empathy as essential qualities for effective special education.

As one teacher directly stated,

> "*It takes patience, empathy and willingness to handle their characteristics and behavior*" (IDI 2). "*Enough time and patience were needed in handling learners with special needs.*" (IDI 8)
> "*I just give him time to express himself.*" (IDI 8)

These emotional investments represent core professional attributes that teachers recognize as fundamental to their practice. The emphasis on giving students adequate time and understanding suggests teachers view these qualities as non-negotiable aspects of effective special education.

***Fulfillment from Student Progress.*** Despite the challenges, teachers express significant professional satisfaction from witnessing growth in their students with special needs.

One teacher noted that,

> "*Witnessing their progress and celebrating their achievements can be deeply fulfilling*" (IDI 6)
> "*I have observed his behavior closely and I concluded that he is really qualified into mainstream class*...*"
> (IDI 4)
> "*...adapting teaching methods to meet diverse needs can lead to a more inclusive and enriching learning environment for all students.*" (IDI 9)

This emotional reward serves as an important motivator that sustains teachers through the challenges of inclusive education. The data suggests that observing tangible progress, however incremental, provides meaningful professional validation for teachers.

***Perseverance and Consistency.*** Teachers demonstrate remarkable persistence in the face of slow or inconsistent progress.

> The necessity of "*going back and forth with the reading lessons*" (IDI 7) and being
> "*consistent in conducting one-on-one reading sessions*" (IDI 2)

These highlights the sustained effort required for effective special education. This perseverance represents a significant emotional and professional commitment that extends beyond standard teaching expectations, requiring sustained dedication over extended periods. This finding supports Anaby et al.'s (2020) argument that inclusive education requires not only specific skills but also particular dispositional qualities that enable teachers to persist through setbacks and slow progress.

### 3.2 Teachers Coping Mechanism in Handling Learners with Special Needs in A Mainstream Classroom

Teachers coping mechanism in handling learners with special needs in a mainstream classroom emerged to be the second theme under the challenges and experiences of teachers handling learners with special needs. This theme elucidates from core ideas which came from an excerpt during in-depth interviews. The core ideas under this theme were: embracing emotional qualities as foundation, creating an accepting classroom culture, celebrating accomplishments, personalizing learning experiences, modifying teaching strategies, problem-solving through challenges, seeking continuous professional development, establishing external assistance, practicing personal self-care, implementing clear classroom management, ensuring equitable participation and building peer understanding. Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) state that general education teachers frequently depend on informal support systems, such family members and coworkers, to deal with the requirements for instructing students with disabilities.
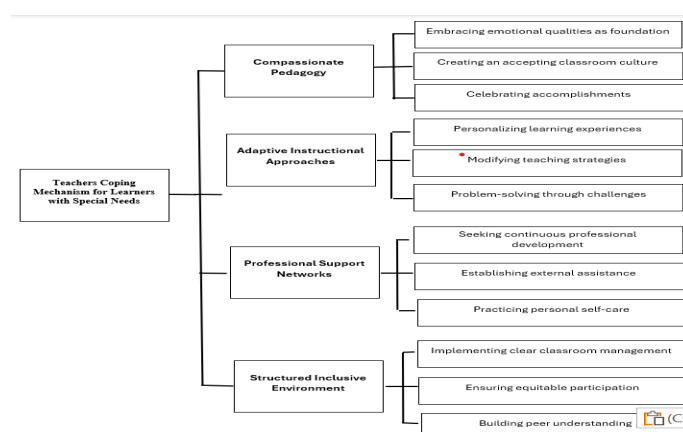
Figure 2. Coping Mechanisms of Teachers in Handling Learners with Special Needs in a Mainstream Classrooms

### 3.2.1 Compassionate Pedagogy

The theme of Compassionate Pedagogy, encompassing emotional qualities, accepting classroom culture, and celebration of accomplishments, resonates strongly with Noddings' (2013) ethics of care framework. This theme encompasses the emotional and attitudinal qualities that teachers consider essential for successfully working with learners with special needs. It recognizes that technical skills alone are insufficient; rather, they must be paired with genuine compassion, patience, and acceptance. I

*Embracing emotional qualities as foundation.* Teachers consistently identified specific emotional qualities as fundamental prerequisites for effectively teaching learners with special needs. The data reveals that teachers view patience, compassion, and acceptance not merely as personal virtues but as essential professional tools.

IDI #3*: "deep compassion... and immeasurable patience are my coping mechanism"*

IDI 2: *"It takes a big heart to teach learners with special needs."*

 IDI 9: *"Accept, love and allow them to learn."*


This statement reflects the emotional labor involved in managing challenging behaviors, providing individualized support, and fostering a sense of belonging for students with diverse needs. The teachers' descriptions highlight the emotional toll of their work while emphasizing the positive impact of emotional intelligence on their effectiveness and job satisfaction. This finding supported by the study of Mayer et al. (2016) underscore the need for a holistic approach to teacher training and professional and professional development.

*Creating an Accepting Classroom Culture.* The data indicates that teachers view celebration and positive reinforcement as crucial components of their approach. Teachers also highlighted the importance of creating an accepting classroom culture. This sub-theme reveals teachers' understanding that acknowledging achievements, however small, serves both as motivation for learners and as a coping mechanism for teachers, allowing them to focus on progress rather than challenges.

*Celebrating Accomplishments.* The practice of celebrating accomplishments emerged as another important component. By celebrating their success and creating opportunities for learners to express their emotions, feelings and knowledge, and teachers employ recognition strategically. This approach serves both as motivation for learners and as a coping mechanism for teachers, allowing them to focus on progress rather than challenges.


### 3.2.2 Adaptive Instructional Approaches

The theme of Adaptive Instructional Approaches speaks directly to the literature on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010) and universal design for learning (Meyer et al., 2014). Teachers in this study described customizing instruction as both pedagogically necessary and personally sustaining.

*Personalizing Learning Experiences*. Personalizing the learning experience within adaptive instructional approaches leverages technology to create tailored educational journeys, ultimately leading to improve student engagement and learning

IDI 2: *"Provide them with individualized instruction."*

IDI 5: *"Provide an activity that fits their learning needs and interests."*

IDI 6: *"Using reading approach, conducting one on one reading assessment."*

A prominent sub-theme in the data was teachers' emphasis on individualization as a coping strategy. The activities that "fit their learning needs and interests" illustrates a deliberate move away from one-size-fits-all approaches. described these tailored approaches not only as beneficial for learners but also as mechanisms that make their work more manageable and effective.

*Modifying teaching strategies*. Modifying teaching strategies is a cornerstone of effective adaptive instructional approaches. Beyond individualization, teachers reported regularly adapting their general teaching strategies to accommodate diverse needs. Explicit mention of adapting teaching strategies reflects conscious modification, while approach of ensuring the student does what others are doing demonstrates adaptation through integration. This sub-theme reveals that flexibility in instructional design serves as both a pedagogical necessity and a coping mechanism.

*Problem-solving through challenges*. Problem-solving through challenges is a vital sub-theme of adaptive instructional approaches, emphasizing the need to engage learners in complex, real-world problems that require innovative solutions (Kerr, 2016).

IDI# 4: "*I easily used problem solving approach to any learners by identifying the root cause of the problem and solve it right away.*"

IDI #7: "*I find a multipronged approach is the most effective.*"

IDI #1: "*At first, I admit it was exhausting, but as time went by, I learned to adjust.*"

The data revealed that teachers view active problem-solving as an essential coping strategy. Teacher uses of a problem-solving approach by identifying the root cause, demonstrates analytical thinking when faced with challenges. Similarly, multipronged approach suggests strategic thinking about complex situations. Teacher reflection on initial exhaustion followed by learning to adjust highlights the developmental nature of this problem-solving capacity. This finding supports research by Emery and Vandenberg (2010), who found that teachers' sense of efficacy in special education contexts is directly related to their ability to modify instruction successfully.

### 3.2.3 Professional Support Networks

The theme of Professional Support Networks encompasses formal professional development, collegial support, and self-care practices. These findings align with Billingsley's (2004) research on factors contributing to special education teacher retention, which identifies administrative support and professional development as critical. The current study extends this understanding by revealing how teachers actively construct these support systems as deliberate coping strategies.

This theme encompasses the various ways teachers seek, establish, and utilize support systems to sustain their practice with special needs learners.

***Seeking Continuous Professional Development***. Continuous Professional Development refers to the ongoing process of acquiring new skills and knowledge to remain relevant and effective in one's profession (CIPD, 2022). Within this context, professional support networks play crucial role in facilitating CPD, providing a framework for collaboration, mentorship, and shared learning experiences.

Teachers consistently identified ongoing learning as essential to their coping strategy.

IDI 5: "*Continuously seeking out professional development opportunities focused on inclusive teaching practices.*"

IDI 5: "*This involved workshops, conference, mentoring program.*"

IDI 7: "*Seeking support and collaboration.*"

The data revealed that teachers recognize teachers' commitment to continuously seeking out professional development opportunities reflects recognition that knowledge acquisition is not a one-time event but a career-long process. The specific mention of workshops, conference, mentoring program indicates the diverse avenues through which teachers pursue this development.

***Establishing External Assistance***. External assistance encompasses a variety of support forms, including peer support, mentorship, community resources, and professional counseling (Brooks et al., 2020). These resources can play a pivotal role in helping individuals navigate the complexities of work-related stress.

IDI 2: "*Establish support from mentors and technical assistance.*"

IDI 7: "*My coping mechanisms fall into several categories; Seeking support and collaboration...*"

IDI 5: "*Working with students with special needs is crucial.*"

The data revealed that teachers described actively establishing support networks with colleagues and experts. they practice of establishing "support from mentors and technical assistance" and explicit inclusion of seeking support and collaboration among primary coping mechanisms demonstrates the intentional cultivation of supportive professional relationships. This sub-theme reveals teachers' understanding that external resources significantly enhance their capacity to address complex challenges.

***Practicing Personal Self-Care***. Personal self-care, encompassing activities that promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being, is not merely a reactive response to stress but a proactive strategy for building resilience (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Within a professional support network, self-care practices can be viewed as a foundational element, strengthening an individual's capacity to navigate challenges and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

IDI 1: "*As teachers, we should embrace the differences of the children and the challenges we encounter every day.*"

IDI 3: "*Purpose of handling learners with special needs and immeasurable patience are my coping mechanism.*"

The data revealed an emerging awareness of practicing personal self-care as a professional necessity. The participant explicitly mention of self-care as a coping mechanism suggests recognition that teacher wellbeing directly impacts teaching effectiveness. This represents an important acknowledgment that sustainable special education practice requires attention to the teacher's own needs (Cook et al. 2017).

## 3.2.4 Structured Inclusive Environment

The theme of Structured Inclusive Environment encompasses classroom management, equitable participation, and peer education. The emphasis on building peer understanding aligns with research by Carter et al. (2016) on the efficacy of peer support interventions in inclusive settings. This theme reflects how teachers establish structured environments that purposefully include all learners through clear expectations, thoughtful integration, and intentional community-building.

***Implementing Clear Classroom Management***. Teachers described implementing clear classroom management as crucial for addressing special needs. The practice of imposing "rules in my class and strictly make them follow" reflects recognition that clear expectations benefit all learners, particularly those with special needs. The use of "proactive strategies such as positive reinforcement" demonstrates that effective management is anticipatory rather than merely reactive.

***Ensuring Equitable Participation***. The commitment to ensuring equitable participation was evident in the data. The participants revealed that the practice of letting the student "join the activities of the normal ones" with "no instance that he is left behind" demonstrates a focus on meaningful engagement rather than token inclusion. This approach recognizes that participation is essential for both learning and social development.

***Building Peer Understanding***. Teachers consistently identified building peer understanding as critical for successful inclusion. The participants practice of explaining "to their classmates of the child with special needs" demonstrates recognition that inclusion requires intentional community preparation. This approach acknowledges that peer attitudes significantly impact both the experience of learners with special needs and the teacher's ability to effectively manage the classroom. These findings support research by Sailor (2015) on multi-tiered systems of support, which emphasizes that successful inclusion requires systematic organizational structures.

## 3.3 Teachers Perceive These Challenges in Maintaining/Creating Positive Learning
### Classroom Environment

Figure 3 displays the data from the participants' in-depth interviews (IDIs). Four (4) main themes emerged regarding creating positive environment for Learners special needs: Pedagogical adaptability and responsiveness, nurturing inclusive classroom communities, professional competence and character development and system-based approaches to inclusion. Moreover, twelve (12) core values have been identified, differentiated instructional approaches, integration of value-based content, adaptation to individual learning capabilities, strategic physical arrangements, fostering acceptance and belonging, managing social dynamics, teacher qualities and dispositions, specialized knowledge and training, modeling inclusive behaviors, classroom management strategies, technology and resource integration, and structures for equitable participation.

### 3.3.1 Pedagogical Adaptability and Responsiveness

This theme captures teachers' recognition that effective inclusive education requires flexibility and continual adaptation of teaching methods to address the diverse learning needs present in mixed-ability classrooms. The data reveals that teachers understand the necessity of moving beyond standardized, one-size-fits-all approaches to embrace differentiation as a fundamental practice. Pedagogical adaptability emerges not merely as a set of techniques but as a mindset that values individualized learning pathways while maintaining high expectations for all students.

***Differentiated Instructional Approaches***. Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of tailoring teaching methods, materials, and assessment strategies to accommodate varied learning profiles. As one teacher articulated, effective inclusive education requires teachers to "tailor teaching methods, materials and assessments to meet the diverse needs of learners." This aligns with Tomlinson and Moon's (2020) differentiated instruction framework, which emphasizes responsiveness to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. As articulated by.

> IDI#2:"*Tailor teaching methods, materials and assessments to meet the diverse needs of learners*"
> IDI # 5&7 "*Differentiation of instruction, meeting the diverse learning needs of all students*"

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of tailoring teaching methods, materials, and assessment strategies to accommodate the varied learning profiles in their classrooms. As articulated by IDI 2, effective inclusive education requires teachers to "tailor teaching methods, materials and assessments to meet the diverse needs of learners." This recognition of the need for differentiation was echoed by IDI 5, who identified "differentiation of instruction, meeting the diverse learning needs of all students" as a primary challenge. The recognition of differentiation as a necessity rather than an enhancement reflects Florian's (2019) inclusive pedagogical approach, which emphasizes extending what is ordinarily available to all learners.

**Integration of Value-Based Content.** Teachers described intentionally integrating content that promotes inclusive values. One participant noted how they "integrate ESP lesson in every learning area that will highlight good values and being kind to everyone." This approach aligns with Slee's (2021) argument that inclusive education should promote broader social justice values rather than focusing narrowly on accommodating differences.

> "*I often integrate ESP lesson in every learning area that will highlight good values and being kind to everyone*"
> (IDI 4)

*"Creating a positive learning environment inside the classroom, we should be fair"* (IDI 8)
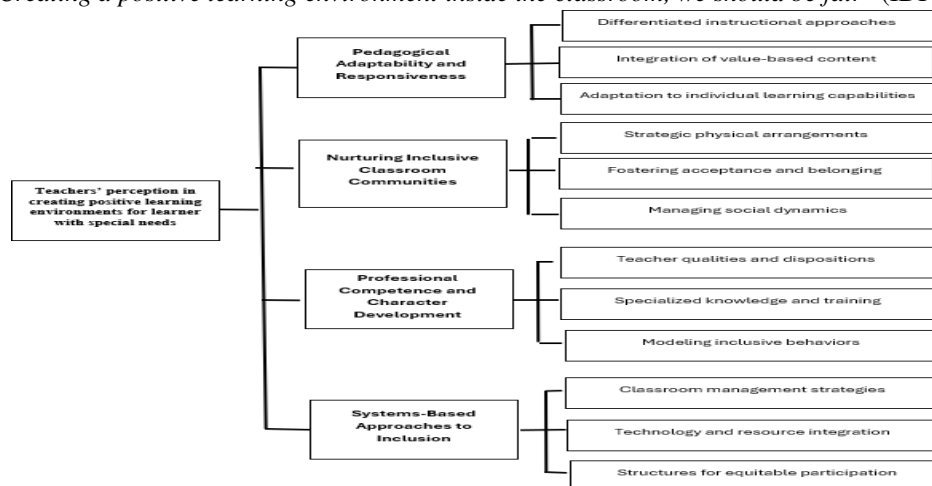


Figure 3. Teachers Perception in Creating Positive Environment for Learners with Special Needs

Research by Sullivan et al. (2023) suggests that curriculum content can be leveraged to develop empathy and reduce prejudice toward differences. This integration of value-based content represents a proactive approach to creating classroom cultures where diversity is respected and appreciated, consistent with Booth and Ainscow's (2021) emphasis on developing inclusive cultures alongside inclusive practices.

**Adaptation to Individual Learning Capabilities.** Teachers acknowledged the need to recognize and accommodate the specific learning profiles of each student. One participant directly referenced the challenge of "accommodating both learners with special needs and mainstream learners," highlighting the dual responsibility teachers face. This reflects the tension identified by Slee (2021) between meeting individual needs and maintaining collective learning experiences.

The emphasis on adapting to individual capabilities aligns with the Universal Design for Learning framework, which advocates for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (Capp, 2020). However, as Waitoller and Kozleski (2021) note, addressing individual needs within group contexts requires sophisticated pedagogical skills and supportive institutional structures.

**Nurturing Inclusive Classroom Communities**

This theme captures teachers' deliberate efforts to create environments where diversity is celebrated, and all students feel belonging. Teachers recognize that academic success connects deeply with emotional safety and social inclusion.

*Strategic Physical Arrangements***:** The physical organization of classrooms emerged as significant for creating inclusive environments. IDI 1 shared an important learning experience to separate my learners with special needs. But when I noticed that it caused self-pity and tantrums, I changed the seating arrangement in their favor." This reflection demonstrates how classroom arrangements can either reinforce exclusion or promote inclusion, consistent with findings from Martin et al. (2021) regarding the impact of physical environments on inclusion. Research by Sullivan et al. (2023) suggests that thoughtful seating arrangements can facilitate positive peer interactions and support collaborative learning

**Fostering Acceptance and Belonging.** Teachers consistently emphasized the emotional dimensions of inclusive education. One participant articulated this clearly, stating that teachers should "let your learners know that they are accepted by everyone. You just let them feel that they are loved and accepted.

The emphasis on "building a positive and inclusive culture that involves fostering respect, empathy, and understanding" reflects an understanding that psychological safety is a prerequisite for effective learning, particularly for students who may experience marginalization. This aligns with Booth and Ainscow's (2021) emphasis on inclusive cultures as a foundation for inclusive practices.

**Managing Social Dynamics.** The complex social interactions within diverse classrooms require deliberate management. One teacher explicitly identified "social dynamic" as one of the primary challenges in creating inclusive environments. Another focused on "ensuring equitable participation for all students," recognizing that social inclusion must translate to academic inclusion through participatory opportunities.

These perceptions align with findings from Hargreaves and O'Connor (2022) regarding the importance of explicitly addressing social dynamics in inclusive classrooms. As Martin et al. (2021) note, teachers must actively facilitate positive social interactions rather than assuming they will develop naturally, particularly in diverse classroom contexts.

**Professional Competence and Character Development**

This theme reflects the dual emphasis on teachers' professional preparation and personal qualities necessary for effective inclusive education. This aligns with research highlighting both knowledge and dispositions as critical factors in inclusive teaching (Forlin, 2024).

**Teacher Qualities and Dispositions.** Teachers highlighted those certain personal qualities are fundamental to success in inclusive education. One participant stated directly that "the teacher who will handle learners with special needs must have a big heart," emphasizing the emotional and empathetic dimensions of effective teaching. This aligns with Forlin's (2024) research on the importance of empathetic dispositions in inclusive education. The recognition that inclusive education

"requires patience, understanding and effective classroom management strategies" reflects the integration of personal qualities with professional skills. As Rouse and McLean (2021) note, effective inclusive teaching involves both technical expertise and emotional intelligence, particularly when addressing challenging behaviors or complex learning needs.

*Specialized Knowledge and Training.* Beyond personal qualities, teachers emphasized the importance of professional preparation. One participant asserted that teachers "must have sufficient knowledge and training to address the needs of the learners," recognizing that empathy alone is insufficient without technical expertise. This aligns with Robinson's (2023) findings regarding the importance of specialized knowledge in inclusive education. The identification of "teacher training" as a key factor highlights the need for formal professional development, consistent with the study of Martínez-Figueira et al. (2022) on the importance of ongoing learning opportunities. As Slee (2021) argues, inclusive education requires sophisticated professional knowledge rather than merely good intentions.

*Modeling Inclusive Behaviors.* Teachers recognized their role as behavioral models who demonstrate the inclusive attitudes they wish to cultivate. One participant explicitly stated that "educators play a vital key role in modeling positive behavior," highlighting how teacher behavior shapes classroom culture. This aligns with social learning theory and research by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2022) on the influence of teacher modeling on student attitudes and behaviors.

**Systems-Based Approaches to Inclusion**

This theme addresses the structural and systematic aspects of creating inclusive environments. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of systems and structures in supporting inclusive education (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2021).

**Classroom Management Strategies.** Teachers consistently identified behavioral management as a distinct challenge in inclusive classrooms. One participant simply listed "classroom managements" as a key challenge, while another identified "behavioral management" as one of three primary challenges. This aligns with research by Sharma et al. (2022) identifying behavior management as a significant concern for teachers in inclusive settings. The mention of "creating a classroom management addressing behavioral issues" acknowledges that effective management must specifically address the behavioral diversity present in inclusive classrooms. As Martin et al. (2021) note, inclusive classroom management requires both preventative approaches and responsive strategies tailored to individual behavioral needs.

**Technology and Resource Integration.** Teachers viewed technological and material resources as important supports for inclusion. One participant advocated that "we should embrace the new trends in teaching with the help of technology," recognizing how technological tools can facilitate differentiation. This aligns with research by Sánchez-Serrano et al. (2022) on the potential of digital tools to support inclusive education.

**Structures for Equitable Participation.** Teachers emphasized the importance of creating systems that ensure all students have opportunities to participate and succeed. One participant specifically highlighted the importance of "ensuring equitable participation for all students," recognizing that inclusion requires active facilitation of involvement. This aligns with Messiou's (2022) transformative approach to inclusion, which emphasizes addressing structural barriers to participation. The reference to promoting "equal opportunities for all students" reinforces this systemic perspective, consistent with Booth and Ainscow's (2021) emphasis on developing inclusive policies alongside inclusive cultures and practices. As Waitoller and Kozleski (2021) note, equitable participation requires more than individual teacher efforts; it requires supportive institutional structures and policies.

**4. Conclusion**

The study offers a comprehensive exploration of teachers' experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in handling learners with special needs within mainstream classrooms. Through a detailed analysis of in-depth interviews, the research reveals the multifaceted nature of inclusive education, encompassing pedagogical adaptations, emotional investment, collaborative networks, and the creation of supportive classroom communities. The findings highlight the critical need for comprehensive professional development, specialized training, and adequate resources to equip educators with the necessary knowledge, skills, and support systems to effectively address diverse learning needs.

A significant theme emerging from the study is the importance of embracing emotional qualities alongside pedagogical skills. Teachers consistently emphasize the crucial role of patience, empathy, and acceptance in creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. The study underscores that effective inclusive practices go beyond technical knowledge and involve a genuine commitment to student well-being and success. The research also emphasizes the importance of fostering a collaborative ecosystem for inclusive practice, involving parents, peers, specialists, and school systems working together to support learners.

The study ultimately calls for a systemic approach to inclusive education, recognizing that individual teacher efforts are insufficient to achieve meaningful inclusion. The research highlights the need for institutional support, policy changes, and ongoing professional development to address the complex challenges of inclusive education. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to create more equitable and supportive learning environments for all students.

**5. Implication and Future Direction**

This research sheds light on the complex challenges and opportunities involved in creating inclusive learning environment for students with special needs integrated in mainstream classrooms. While teachers demonstrate remarkable dedication and adaptability, this study emphasizes the need for systemic change and meaningful interventions. Effective inclusion requires more than teacher efforts- it necessitates changes in policy, increase in resources, and well-planned professional development programs to ensure sustainable and effective inclusive practices. Additionally, this study highlights the crucial role of emotional intelligence which is equally important as pedagogical skills. Teachers emphasize the importance of patience, empathy, and acceptance in creating learning ambience that is welcoming and supportive, advocating for teacher training that will addresses emotional intelligence as a very vital component of effective inclusive teaching.

With these findings, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to best understand the long-term impacts of inclusive practices in relation to integrating students with special needs in mainstream classrooms. Policy analysis to identify and propose changes that support inclusive practices is very crucial in creating more equitable educational systems. Developing a framework for measuring and developing emotional intelligence among teachers could further enhance their capacity for effective inclusive practice. Furthermore, in-depth research into the effectiveness of technology in supporting inclusion would provide evidence-based guidelines for its optimal use. Finally, disseminating best practices and effective strategies identified in the study to a wider audience of educators could help to promote more successful inclusive classrooms. By addressing the implications and pursuing these future directions, we can continue to create more equitable and supportive learning environments for all students.

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