Behind the Scenes of Inclusion: Classroom Narratives of Teachers Handling Learners with Disability

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Abstract: This study looked into the real-life experiences of teachers managing inclusive classrooms with learners with disabilities in Talomo District, Davao City. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, eight teachers were interviewed in-depth to understand the challenges they encountered and how they coped with them. From the analysis of their stories, two major themes emerged regarding their experiences such as identifying effective classroom management strategies and the use of differentiated instruction to meet diverse learning needs. These findings highlight the critical role of teacher adaptability and intentional instructional planning in fostering an inclusive learning environment where all students can thrive. To deal with these challenges, teachers coping mechanism were self-care practices and targeted approach and understanding. Drawing upon the experiences, challenges and coping mechanisms of teachers in managing inclusive classrooms, this study had developed educational management insights namely adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a guiding framework for inclusive education and conducting teachers' training on inclusive practices and flexible teaching strategies. The insights highlighted the need for continuous professional development to help educators adapt and grow in inclusive settings. Ultimately, this study aimed to give voice to both special education and regular classroom teachers working with mainstreamed learners with disabilities.

Keywords: *Behind the Scenes of Inclusion, Classroom Narratives, Teachers, Handling Learners with Disability.*

How to Cite: Jane G. Sagpang (2025) Behind the Scenes of Inclusion: Classroom Narratives of Teachers Handling Learners with Disability. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(10), 2547-2550. https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25oct1555

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of inclusion in education has gained widespread recognition and support, with efforts to implement it increasingly visible across the globe. Embracing inclusion as a foundational principle in education represents a crucial step in nurturing young learners' capacity not only to understand but also to appreciate human diversity. Over the past decades, educators and policymakers have collaborated to promote inclusivity, resulting in notable transformations in educational practices. These efforts have influenced legislation, establishing a legal framework that safeguards the rights of learners with disabilities and mandates their inclusion in mainstream education. Beyond legal mandates, these changes have fostered a broader societal mindset that values diversity as a strength rather than a limitation. Despite widespread support for inclusive education, translating this concept into practice within mainstream classrooms remains a significant challenge for general education teachers, highlighting the complexities inherent in these initiatives.

Inclusive education, also referred to as mainstreaming, has become a crucial global policy objective. For instance, the United Kingdom exemplifies this commitment. This framework specifically stresses the imperative for everyone to actively participate in choices that affect their well-being and future (Boswell et al., 2021). Similarly, in the United States, a landmark law mandating inclusive schooling for students with disabilities is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA centers on developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which are tailored to address the unique requirements of each student. Burke and Boccia (2020) note the profound historical significance of IDEA, which they consider a cornerstone of federal education law. This pivotal legislation

was initially enacted in 1975 under the name Education of All Handicapped Children Act.

Across Asia, several countries have enacted policies and initiatives to advance inclusive education, though implementation varies due to differences in culture, governance, and resources. For instance, Japan's Act for Eliminating Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (2013), Thailand's "Education for All" policy (2005), and Vietnam's National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities (2015) all aim to promote inclusion. However, Arias et al. (2023) observed that challenges such as insufficient resources, limited professional training, inconsistent legislation, weak government support, and the need for proper classroom organization and assessment practices continue to impede the effective implementation of inclusive education in some Asian countries.

Locally, there's a real dedication to inclusive education, and you can see it through the development of progressive policies. One standout is R. A. 11650, titled "Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act". This important legislation safeguards the right of every citizen to receive quality education and bolsters national efforts to ensure that education is accessible to all learners. The law is designed to break down barriers that prevent students from reaching their full potential, offering support to everyone, no matter their abilities. Historically, learners with disabilities (LWDs) in public schools have often been neglected, which has led to lower academic performance.

At the local level, particularly in Talomo District, Davao City, teachers have shared firsthand experiences working with learners with disabilities in inclusive settings. These accounts reveal the unique challenges and rewarding aspects of teaching in inclusive classrooms. Teachers must navigate a wide spectrum of student needs, requiring adaptability, a nuanced understanding of various disabilities, and a commitment to providing effective support for every learner.

II. METHOD

The qualitative research design for this study is phenomenological, employing open-ended interviews to gather a rich, in-depth view of the subjects' personal experiences. This method allows the researcher to extract shared meanings and recurring themes from the collected narratives, accurately representing the authentic experiences of those who teach in inclusive classroom environments. This study utilized In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) as the primary data collection method. This approach enabled participants to share detailed accounts of their routines, challenges, and personal reflections in an open and conversational manner. Through this phenomenological lens, the study sought to explore the lived realities of both regular and special education teachers in inclusive settings.

Moreover, this study was conducted in the Talomo District of Davao City. A total of eight (8) participants were purposely selected as key informants based on their role as classroom teachers employed under the Department of Education (DepEd). The purposive sampling technique, also known as judgment sampling, was used because it allows the researcher to deliberately select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the research phenomenon. The inclusion criteria were as follows: Teachers who have been teaching for six months to two years in DepEd public schools or are newly hired. Teachers who have had experience handling inclusive classrooms. Teachers who are teaching at the elementary level and have handled learners with disabilities.

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. My main responsibility as a researcher was to obtain authentic and relevant data by facilitating open, respectful, and empathetic conversations with participants about their experiences in inclusive classrooms. To maintain ethical integrity, I ensured transparency by clearly explaining all procedures, including how their data would be used, stored, and protected. I also remained reflexive throughout the study, acknowledging my own perspectives, biases, and assumptions, to ensure that the participants' voices were represented authentically and accurately in the findings.

Further, the data collection process in this phenomenological study involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected teachers from the Talomo District, Davao City. These interviews provided an opportunity for participants to narrate their lived experiences in handling learners with disabilities (LWDs) in inclusive or mainstream classroom settings. Furthermore, all gathered data underwent a rigorous and systematic process of review and analysis. The researcher employed thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework, which follows O'Connor and Gibson's (2003) framework, the data were systematically organized and categorized to reveal emerging concepts. Ideas that frequently appeared across participants were grouped under specific codes, which were later expanded into broader themes.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Exploring the classroom narratives of teachers who work with learners with diverse background provides valuable insights into both the successes and ongoing challenges of inclusive education. Through in-depth interviews, the lived experiences of these teachers revealed a complex picture of how inclusion is enacted in everyday classroom settings. The following themes, drawn from their narratives, highlight the realities of teaching in mainstream classrooms with diverse learners, particularly those with disabilities.

➢ *Identifying Effective Classroom Management Strategies*

A central concern for teachers working with learners with disabilities is identifying effective classroom management strategies. Teachers face the ongoing challenge of adapting to new situations and employing effective strategies to meet the unique needs of each student, requiring continual learning and adjustment. They emphasized the importance of staying informed about the latest research and interventions in inclusive environment, highlighting the need for continuous professional development to enhance teaching effectiveness. Sanir et al. (2022), citing Jones and Brownell (2014), highlighted that effective inclusion requires educators to be sensitive and responsive to each student's unique learning requirements, creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

➢ *Differentiated Instruction*

The teacher-participants highlighted the ongoing challenge of continuously adapting lesson plans to address both behavioral needs and academic growth. They emphasized how behavioral issues can disrupt learning, underlining the importance of mastering behavior management strategies. These underscore these responses demonstrate the constant adaptability, learning, and collaboration that teachers must engage in to effectively meet the diverse learning and behavioral needs of their students. Pozas et al. (2021) emphasized that adapting teaching practices to accommodate varied learning needs ensures that all students feel included and valued. Strogilos et al. (2023, citing Tomlinson (2017), described how teachers differentiate instruction across four categories: content, learning process, outcomes, and environment, aligning them with students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles.

Meanwhile, teachers cope with the challenges in implementing inclusive classroom settings that ultimately foster a positive and effective learning environment for both themselves and their students. The themes on the coping mechanisms were Self-Care Practices and Targeted Approach and Understanding:

➢ *Self-Care Practices*

Managing a room full of learners with diverse needs can be a taxing job. Through the incorporation of mindfulness techniques, teachers demonstrate a proactive approach to navigating the challenges of diverse classrooms, recognizing the importance of maintaining mental health. Similarly, they emphasized regular exercise as a holistic strategy that not only supports physical well-being but also enhances mental clarity, enabling teachers to approach each school day with renewed energy and focus. The study of Jennings et al. (2021) support this perspective, linking strong classroom management to teacher well-being. Their research highlights the role of teachers' social and emotional skills, including self-care strategies like stress management and mindfulness, in creating conducive learning environments.

➢ *Targeted Approach and Understanding*

A targeted and empathetic approach can serve as a highly effective combination when working with learners in inclusive classrooms. Although implementing these personalized approaches requires significant time and effort, teachers recognize their profound impact on student growth and achievement, showing how even small adjustments can make learning more meaningful. Building personal connections with students further underscores the importance of trust and rapport in encouraging confidence and active participation in the classroom. Tomlinson (2021) supports this view, highlighting that differentiated teaching in inclusive classrooms increases student engagement and academic performance. Tailoring content, processes, and products to match students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles not only empowers learners but also reduces stress and fosters autonomy.

Drawing on the experiences and challenges faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms, educational leaders can gain invaluable insights into creating environments that support the success of all learners, particularly those with disabilities. Teachers, as frontliners, have a deep understanding of the daily realities involved in meeting diverse student needs. The insights' insights are Implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Conducting Training on Flexible Instructional methods and Inclusive Practices. This underscores the need of adopting inclusive approaches and supporting teachers in effectively managing diverse classrooms. By prioritizing targeted approaches, and the implementation of Universal Design Learning, educators creates environment that provide opportunity to succeed.

Overall, the findings of your study align closely with Vygotsky's (1998) Social Constructivism Theory and Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (2005) emphasizing that the experiences and coping mechanisms of teachers in inclusive classrooms are shaped through dynamic social interactions and layered environmental influences. The findings suggest that effective inclusive education is not only a product of teacher-student interactions but also of the broader educational and social environments that shape teachers' daily practices.

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