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Lived Experiences of Teachers Teaching Children with Special Needs in Mainstreaming: Basis for an Action Plan

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the experiences, challenges, and triumphs of teachers in mainstream classes who educate children with special needs. The study used a phenomenological approach to better understand how instructors explain their lived experiences, accommodations, and changes in implementing inclusive education. Thematic analysis revealed several major themes, including instructional adaptation and time management, communication hurdles and parental support, improved social skills and peer interactions, and increased engagement and holistic development. The findings show that teachers confront substantial problems, such as managing time and meeting varied learning demands, overcoming communication barriers, and ensuring effective parental support. However, teachers noted effectiveness in increasing students' independence, social skills, and overall involvement. The study emphasizes the value of reflective practice and professional development, as well as advocacy and implementation of inclusive practices. Based on the findings, a comprehensive action plan was presented to improve teachers' lived experiences with mainstreaming. The strategy involves professional development programs, collaborative practices, and increased communication channels with parents. The goal of implementing these measures is to increase teacher readiness, encourage inclusive education practices, and create a more inclusive learning environment for all students. This study enhances the area of special education by making evidence-based recommendations for improving inclusive education practices. It emphasizes the importance of continued teacher support and professional development, as well as the vital role that inclusive education plays in encouraging social and intellectual development for students with exceptional needs.

Keywords: *lived experiences, children with special needs, mainstreaming*

1. Context and Rationale

Including children with special needs in regular classes is one of the most vital educational issues. The school system strives for an inclusive approach in which children of all skills and backgrounds learn together in the same classroom. Public schools are critical in establishing inclusive communities that strive to educate everyone. As receiving teachers, normal teachers who are responsible for educating both regular learners and children with special needs in a mainstream class play an important role. Accommodation for students with special needs is vital for mainstream education's success, and instructors' motivation, training opportunities, and perceptions are critical variables in this process.

According to Republic Act No. 11650, signed into law in March 2022, is a watershed moment for inclusive education in the Philippines. It is titled "An Act Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities," and it highlights the right to a high-quality education for all students, including those with special needs. This act promotes school-community collaboration by identifying goals such as implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and establishing Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs). This statute acts as a critical backdrop as educators explore teachers' lived experiences in mainstreaming children with special needs, giving a framework for inclusive practices and driving the formulation of a strategic action plan.

It is a challenging task for special education teachers, especially regular and receiving teachers, to work with students who have special needs in a mainstream class. The researcher was motivated to compare the attitudes and motivations of normal and receiving teachers regarding including students with special educational needs in mainstream classes because of their opinions and attitudes toward this inclusion. The researcher noticed that there are several issues in the mainstream class. It is critical to investigate the regular and receiving teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming because it is one of the methods for the school and administrators to determine whether the program is beneficial.

Mainstream classes are diverse. This variety in a student's academic, social, emotional, and behavioral capacities is influenced by personal social, cultural, and economic circumstances. Therefore, using cutting-edge teaching and instructional techniques that allow all students to be interested in learning, acquire skills, and accomplish academically to their full potential is essential for effective schooling. The status quo in many schools is being challenged

by the need for instructors to move away from the "one size fits all" instructional techniques that are now dominant and that are expected of today's successful pupils. The use of differentiation in teaching is an increasing concern in educational institutions all over the world (UNESCO, 2017, 2020).

Numerous studies have documented regular and receiving teachers' perceptions of mainstream classes, Muta, Korenaga, Kuorelahti, and Savolainen (2020) found that teachers' attitudes were inconsistent and often unfavorable. The Finnish educators were concerned about instructors' ability to adopt inclusion, especially when working with children who have intellectual challenges or emotional and behavioral concerns. Japanese instructors saw the benefits of mainstream education for both disabled and non-disabled children. Finnish teachers in this study were more suspicious of the idea that the efficacy discourse confirms the need for inclusive education than Japanese teachers because Finnish schools stress the effectiveness of mainstream education. The findings support the idea that more research is needed to investigate how advancements in mainstream education are implemented in various cultural and historical contexts to improve the overall understanding of mainstream education.

This study intends to provide insights into teachers' practical challenges and triumphs, as well as evidence-based recommendations to help them succeed in mainstream classrooms. Understanding teachers' life experiences aids in identifying their needs, motivations, and effective techniques, helping to the establishment of more inclusive educational policies and procedures. This research also corresponds with a commitment to advance inclusive education by providing actionable recommendations to improve teacher training, policy development, and classroom practices for the benefit of both teachers and children.

Research Questions

The primary aim of this study is to identify the lived experiences of teachers teaching children with special needs in mainstreaming that will be a basis for an action plan. The questions below will guide the study's goal and assumptions.

- How do participants characterize their lived experiences as teachers of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms, including the challenges and successes they face in creating an inclusive learning environment?

- How do participants describe their accommodations and modifications in implementing mainstream programs to serve the various needs of both regular learners and children with special needs?

- How do teachers' lived experiences influence their motivation, perceptions, and overall effectiveness as receiving teachers for children with special needs in the mainstreaming program?

- What themes can be derived from the statement of the participants?

- Based on the study's findings, what comprehensive action plan may be proposed?

2. Research Methodology

The study used a phenomenological qualitative research method, searching into the visible components of the phenomenon and obtaining new insights and a deeper understanding. To bring to light things that have become so "normal" that we are oblivious to what is going on at work and what is expected of us. It also has a close connection to qualitative research approaches in general (Vagle, M. D. 2018).

The investigation of the viewpoints about mainstreaming, their roles, struggles, and experiences of regular and receiving teachers in the implementation of mainstreaming was a unique and fascinating problem.

2.1 Participants and/or other Sources of Data and Information

The teacher participants were selected at Majayjay Elementary School, which caters to Special Education classes. This research took place in classrooms where teachers are making their way through inclusive education. Because the purpose of the study is to carefully choose individuals who will offer unique insights into the lived experiences of instructors working in mainstreaming children with special needs, purposive sampling was chosen. While the regular teacher who will be chosen is a recently hired educator who works with ordinary kids, the instructors who were chosen were handling special education needs in the mainstream class and had attended seminars for inclusive education.

The study involves five (5) teachers who work with students who have special needs in regular classroom settings. When choosing the participants, questions regarding their age, gender, level of education, and number of years of experience teaching special needs children were asked. Collaborating with educational authorities and administrators aids in the identification of inclusive classrooms at Majayjay Elementary School. Different representation criteria were created, and teachers were issued an open invitation, emphasizing the voluntary aspect of involvement. The selection process promotes experience richness and depth to achieve a thorough understanding of inclusive education in this unique location.

The researcher obtained the respondents' permission by outlining the study's contents, including how the data was collected, and obtaining their approval. They were assured that their names, as well as the information acquired in the study, were kept private. Furthermore, the participants' safety was prioritized, and they were informed that no harm would be done to them while they participated in the study, and they had the option to withdraw their agreement at any moment.

2.2 Data Gathering Methods

Collaboration with inclusive education settings is required during the identification process, with an emphasis on varied representation in terms of demographics, teaching experience, and geographic regions. Teachers are urged to join willingly through open invitations and expressions of interest, ensuring that their distinctive viewpoints are valued in the study. Collaboration with educational institutions and transparent disclosure of the study goal aid in the establishment of trust and permissions. The sampling technique promotes experience richness and depth, aiming for a balanced representation of both seasoned educators and those new to inclusive practices. The participant selection process incorporates ethical issues such as confidentiality and continuing withdrawal options.

This approach is intended to produce a thorough understanding of the challenges, accomplishments, and complex perspectives of instructors in mainstream classrooms, while also adding significant insights to the broader conversation on inclusive education.

2.3 Data Analysis

When the chairman approved the thesis proposal, the data collection process began. Following that, the researcher explained the study's objectives to the participants and handed out consent forms, inviting them to participate voluntarily. To ensure reliable information gathering, scheduled interviews were done, with participants notified of the recording (video or audiotape). The researcher created a semi-structured interview questionnaire guideline. To establish a relaxed atmosphere, the researcher made the first interview session friendly. The first section of the survey inquired about participants' ideas on mainstreaming, followed by questions concerning their thoughts and experiences with implementing mainstream classes. The final section went into their observations and recommendations for mainstreaming youngsters with exceptional needs. The full interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes. In addition, the respondents' transcribed responses were sent to them for evaluation and validation. Following the interview, the transcription of responses from the five participants was done. To maintain transparency, transcribed responses from participants were shared with them for evaluation and validation. This iterative procedure promotes precision and adherence to ethical research practices.

The researcher created a semi-structured interview questionnaire guideline that served as the main instrument, which was validated and used to collect the data. The development and interpretation of codes/themes were done to provide a simple explanation of the participants' experiences, which is necessary for understanding the participants' perspectives. This is the most suitable design for the study in terms of the K–12 curriculum, which adopted mainstreaming children with special needs in regular classes.

One technique for examining qualitative data, like written answers to open-ended questions or interview transcripts, is thematic analysis. Finding and analyzing the themes that appear in the data is the aim of thematic analysis. To do this, the data must first be divided into manageable chunks, coded to find trends and themes, and then the data must be interpreted and synthesized to produce conclusions. A literature review can be helpful in a thematic analysis by offering context and background information for interpreting the analysis's findings, as well as identifying possible themes to search for in the data. Thematic analysis is a potent and adaptable technique that may be applied in a range of paradigmatic or epistemological frameworks to analyze qualitative data.

The thematic analysis involves six steps. The process of doing a theme analysis begins with familiarizing oneself with the complete collection of data, which requires reviewing the data repeatedly and actively. The data set may consist of field notes, journal entries, recorded observations, interviews, focus groups, and other media like photos or videos, depending on the project. Coding, the initial genuinely analytical stage of the procedure, aids in the fine-grained, targeted organization of data. Following the familiarization process in step 1, researchers can start making notes on possible interesting data items, queries, relationships between data items, and other draft concepts. The coding process for phase 2 has begun. This phase of work generates codes, not themes. The third step involves an examination of the coded and collated data extracts to look for potential themes of broader significance. The selection of themes, or how those walls and roofs are constructed, is essentially an interpretive and active process. Step 4 is all about going over themes again. Step 5 involves the researcher developing a definition and narrative description of each theme, along with an explanation of its significance to the larger research question, once the thematic map has been improved. We check that the titles of the subjects that will be covered in the final report are appropriate in length and description. Writing up the final analysis and findings description is the last step. The note-taking, theme-describing, and representative data extract selection processes from earlier steps have already started some aspects of the writing process (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). A thematic analysis should be approached with an open mind because the themes that surface from the data might not necessarily be what the researcher had in mind. To make sure that all pertinent data is taken into account and that the themes found are supported by the data, it is also crucial to conduct the analytical process thoroughly and methodically.

Discussion of Results

Problem 1: How do participants characterize their lived experiences as teachers of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms, including the challenges and successes they face in creating an inclusive learning environment?

Research question 1 investigates how teachers describe their lived experiences when educating kids with exceptional needs in normal classes. It aims to understand the emotional, professional, and practical aspects of their experiences. Understanding these experiences is important for a variety of reasons. First, it throws into perspective the day-to-day realities of teaching, including the challenges and triumphs they confront. Second, it describes strategies

and adaptations they use to foster an inclusive learning environment. Finally, it gives information about the support systems and resources required for successful inclusion.

Problem 2. How do participants describe their accommodations and modifications in implementing mainstream programs to serve the various needs of both regular learners and children with special needs?

Inclusive education aims to create equal educational environments for all children, including those with special needs, by removing barriers to learning and fostering a feeling of community. Accommodations and adjustments are critical to attaining this goal. Differentiated instruction tailors teaching methods and surroundings to match the various requirements of students, whereas peer support and teaching rely on classmates to help them grasp and engage with the curriculum. Individualized approaches, such as altering instructional tempo and including visual aids, ensure that all students receive the necessary support to excel academically and socially in mainstream classes.

Problem 3: How do teachers' lived experiences influence their motivation, perceptions, and overall effectiveness as receiving teachers for children with special needs in the mainstreaming program?

Teachers' lived experiences influence their motivation, attitudes, and overall success in educating students with special needs in mainstream settings. These experiences include the challenges and accomplishments encountered while transitioning to inclusive teaching approaches, managing diverse classrooms, and working with parents and special education experts. Understanding how these experiences affect teachers is critical for developing training programs, support networks, and regulations that promote an inclusive educational environment. This study seeks to investigate the subtle ways in which teachers' personal and professional journeys influence their approach to mainstreaming, thereby improving educational outcomes for all students.

Problem 4. What themes can be derived from the statement of the participants?

The study's findings were expressed in fourteen (6) superordinate themes and twelve (12) subthemes gathered from interviews of teachers teaching children with special needs in a mainstreaming program. These are as follows: Superordinate themes were "Adaptation Towards Inclusive Education", "Cultivating an Inclusive Environment", "Personalized Instructions and Support Strategies", "Nurturing Classroom Atmosphere for All", "Reflective Practice and Professional Growth", and "Advocacy and Implementation of Inclusive Practices". The Subthemes were "Instructional Adaptation and Time Management", "Communication Barriers and Parental Support", "Enhanced Social Skills and Peer Relationships", "Increased Engagement and Holistic Development", "Task Pacing", "Differentiated Instruction and Peer Support", "Structured Engagement and Social Integration", "Visual and Practical Strategies for Independence", "Reflective Teaching and Adaptation", "Emotional Engagement and Motivation", "Understanding and Acceptance", and "Effectiveness of Strategies and Action Plans." Conclusion and Recommendations

Problem 5. Based on the study's findings, what comprehensive action plan may be proposed?

ACTION PLAN ON ENHANCING LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN MAINSTREAMING

This action plan aims to enhance the lived experiences of teachers in mainstreaming children with special needs, drawing on the findings of the study "Lived Experiences of Teachers Teaching Children with Special Needs in Mainstreaming: Basis for an Action Plan." The research identified several key weaknesses, including challenges in instructional adaptation and time management, communication barriers and lack of parental support, difficulties in enhancing social skills. To address these shortcomings, the action plan suggests particular approaches such as regular professional development workshops, improved parental engagement programs, structured social skills development activities, and holistic development programs. Each strategy is intended to achieve specified goals, with defined implementation deadlines and projected outcomes. By concentrating on these areas, the strategy hopes to foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for both instructors and students.

Table 4. ACTION PLAN ON ENHANCING LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN MAINSTREAMING

Weakness in Findings	Strategies	Objectives	Target Skills	Implementation Dates	Place	Budget	Source of Funding	Person Involved	Expected Output	Evaluation
1. Instructional Adaptation and Time Management	Regular Professional Development Workshops	✓ To provide teachers with skills and knowledge to effectively adapt instructional methods and manage time in inclusive classrooms.	Instructional adaptation Time management, Differentiated Instruction.	August 2024 – October 2024 (Quarterly workshops)	School Premise	₱ 100,000	MOOE	School administrators External Trainers, and Experienced SPED Educators	Enhanced instructional skills and improved time management in inclusive classrooms.	Pre- and post-workshop surveys, classroom observations.
2. Communication Barriers and Parental Support	Enhanced Parental Engagement Programs	✓ To improve parental involvement and understanding of inclusive education practices.	Communication Collaboration Understanding of Inclusive Education Benefits.	September 2024 – December 2024 (Monthly meetings)	School Premise	₱ 50,000	PTA Funds	Teachers Parents, School Counselors	Increased parental support and improved communication channels between parents and teachers.	Feedback forms from parents, attendance records.

Weakness in Findings	Strategies	Objectives	Target Skills	Implementation Dates	Place	Budget	Source of Funding	Person Involved	Expected Output	Evaluation
3. Enhanced Social Skills and Peer Relationships	Social Skills Development Activities	✓ To facilitate positive peer relationships and social skills development among students with special needs.	Social interaction Peer Support Collaborative Learning	October 2024 – April 2025 (Ongoing initiatives)	School Premise	₱ 60,000	School Activity Fund	Classroom Teachers School Psychologists Student Mentors	Improved social skills and peer relationships among students with special needs.	Student social skills assessments, peer feedback.
4. Increased Engagement and Holistic Development	Holistic Development Programs	✓ To enhance students' overall development through inclusive educational practices.	Academic Achievement Behavioral Management Social Skills.	November 2024 – June 2025 (Semester-based programs)	School Premise	₱ 80,000	MOOE	Teachers, Extracurricular Activity Coordinators, Special Education Staff	Comprehensive development of students with special needs, including academic, behavioral, and social progress.	Academic performance records, behavioral assessments, participation in extracurricular activities.

4.1 Conclusion

The study demonstrates that teachers' lived experiences in mainstreaming children with special needs are multifaceted, comprising both considerable problems and notable accomplishments. Participants noted numerous key issues, including difficulties with instructional adaptation, time management, and overcoming communication barriers. They also noted difficulties in ensuring enough parental support and meeting varied student needs within the confines of a standard classroom. Despite these hurdles, teachers indicated effectiveness in helping children with special needs improve their social skills, engage more, and develop positively overall. The participants' experiences highlight the dynamic character of inclusive education, in which adaptability and resilience are essential in negotiating the challenges of mainstream classrooms.

Teachers specified the numerous accommodations and adaptations they implemented to suit the unique requirements of children with special needs while also serving regular learners. These included specialized instructional strategies, changes to classroom management, and the implementation of individualized learning goals. The study emphasizes that, while these changes are critical for creating an inclusive learning environment, they frequently

necessitate significant work and constant reflection from teachers. The importance of strong action plans and organized support structures was underlined to ensure that these changes are both practicable and effective.

Teachers' lived experiences have a substantial impact on their motivation, perspectives, and overall success in mainstreaming initiatives. The study discovered that good outcomes, such as student progress and improved classroom dynamics, significantly increase instructors' enthusiasm and commitment to inclusive education. In contrast, problems and setbacks might have an impact on their beliefs in effectiveness and lead to emotions of frustration. The study emphasizes the relevance of reflective practices and continuous professional development in keeping teachers motivated and successful. Furthermore, teachers' dedication to inclusion and personal development in understanding and responding to varied needs is are critical component of their overall efficacy.

Thematic analysis of participant statements revealed several key themes, including reflective practice and professional growth, advocacy, and implementation of inclusive practices, instructional adaptation and time management, communication barriers and parental support, enhanced social skills and peer relationships, and increased engagement and holistic development. These topics highlight the intricate interplay between teachers' experiences, challenges, and tactics for creating inclusive educational settings. They highlight the importance of continual reflection, strategic advocacy, and adaptability in the practice of inclusive education.

Based on the study's findings, a comprehensive action plan is recommended to improve teachers' lived experiences in mainstreaming programs. The plan focuses on addressing recognized deficiencies such as educational adaptability, time management, and communication hurdles, as well as advocating effective techniques for assisting both children with special needs and their typically developing classmates. The action plan includes professional development activities, increased parental engagement, and organized support systems to help with the effective adoption of inclusive practices. This strategy seeks to give teachers with the tools, resources, and support they require to improve their work and increase the general inclusion of their educational environments.

4.2 Recommendations

Implement regular professional development programs that cover inclusive teaching practices, time management, and effective communication. These courses should include both the practical and theoretical components of inclusive education, providing teachers with the skills they need to effectively handle varied classroom contexts.

Develop and carry out programs that encourage parental involvement and support. This includes workshops for parents to learn about the benefits of inclusive education and how to assist their children's learning at home.

Create networks of support inside schools that give teachers access to more resources, such as specialized training, teaching assistants, and the opportunity to collaborate with special educators. These solutions should be intended to reduce the strain on instructors and improve their ability to adopt inclusive practices effectively.

Create a culture of reflective practice among teachers by implementing regular feedback methods. This could include peer observations, self-assessment tools, and chances for teachers to share their experiences and techniques with their colleagues.

Advocate for continuous evaluation and adaptation of inclusive education approaches based on feedback from teachers, students, and parents. This entails evaluating the efficacy of existing solutions and making necessary adjustments to promote ongoing improvement in inclusive education.

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