

## **Teaching learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classroom environment: Lived experiences of teachers in General Santos City SPED integrated school**

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the lived experiences of teachers who are teaching learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classroom environment at the General Santos City SPED Integrated School. It sought to provide practical insights into how inclusive education is carried out, catering to the specific needs of learners with intellectual disabilities within a mainstream context. This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. Qualitative data were generated from ten participants, who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria, through In-Depth Interview (IDI). IDI-generated data were supplemented with information obtained from observations in the classrooms and residences of the participants. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing and interpreting the data. The study's findings revealed that the integration of learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classroom is primarily motivated by adapting to behaviors and academic practices, fostering their ability to function as normal learners, and preparing them for future integration into society. Moreover, teachers experience numerous interconnected challenges when teaching learners with intellectual disabilities. These are problems with communication skills, lack of resources and support, and limited professional training. Strategies and interventions to effectively integrate learners with intellectual disabilities include differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, group activities, structured routines, and a personalized learning plan. Finally, the impact of lived experiences on the teachers' effectiveness and motivation includes appreciation of Inclusive education, strengthened patience, and the ability to adopt teaching methods to diverse learners.

**Keywords:** learners with intellectual disabilities, mainstream classroom environment, lived experiences, GSC SPED Integrated School

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## INTRODUCTION

A place is created where the social and academic atmosphere is available for all learners in inclusive education. Over the past decades, an extensive transformation has occurred within the mainstream integration of intellectual disability learners among all global efforts to ensure inclusive education. The philosophy of inclusive education is anchored on creating an environment in which all learners (with and without disabilities) are welcome academically and socially. This is in harmony with international and national policies that support quality education for all disabled individuals. Two of the most common policies in the country are the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (Republic Act No. 7277, 1992) and the Enhanced Basic Education Act (Republic Act No.

10533, 2013). These laws for inclusive education give the power to justify equitable access to education opportunities through enhancing an inclusive education system for all learners. These laws reinforce the school's responsibility to accommodate students with special needs in the regular classroom within the "No child shall be left behind" slogan.

Key insights for improving inclusive education policies arise from the firsthand experiences of educators working in inclusive schools. Researchers can look into the unique challenges and strategies teachers adopt to create successful, inclusive classrooms to better understand how these policies are implemented. Laws, regulations, and teacher training programs must be regularly updated to ensure that educational practices align with the changing demands of inclusive education. In research by Florian and Spratt (2013), advocacy is put forward for teachers to pursue further professional development to help them deal with the issues that arise even in inclusive education.

Inclusion is not without its challenges, but teaching students with intellectual disabilities in a manner that is accepted as part of the mainstream can be very rewarding. General Santos City SPED Integrated School's teachers help create a front row for an inclusive platform where all students can come and learn. As of 2024, it has 25 Grade 7 learners (11 males and 14 females), 37 Grade 8 learners (14 males and 23 females), a total of 15 Grade 9 learners (7 males and 8 girls), 12 in Grade 10 learners (2 boys and 10 girls) along with 23 non-graded learners (8 boys, 15 girls). So, the school has become a melting pot of other learners in one class. It integrates more diversified learners and thereby requires more personalized teaching innovations by educators because students with intellectual disabilities have very specific needs.

This study is part of a larger research effort on inclusive education to create an environment where every learner, regardless of their disabilities, has an equal opportunity to thrive. Research on inclusive education is worth no less. Research study reported by Ainscow (2020) concludes that inclusive classrooms not only benefit learners with intellectual impairments. Still, they can also be an asset when "typical" learners approach school interactions more humanely, socially, and civic-mindedly when engaging with children of varying abilities. To this end, this study aimed to explore and document teachers' experiences handling learners with disabilities in General Santos City SPED Integrated School, considering the following components: challenges, barriers, coping mechanisms, support system, and impact.

### *Problem Statement*

This research investigated the lived experiences of teachers who are teaching learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classrooms at the General Santos City SPED Integrated School. It sought to provide practical insights into how inclusive education is carried out, catering to the specific needs of learners with intellectual disabilities within a mainstream context.

Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How are learners with intellectual disabilities integrated in mainstream classroom under the inclusive education program?
2. What are the challenges that teachers experienced in teaching learners with intellectual disabilities?
3. What strategies and interventions do teachers employ to effectively integrate learners with intellectual disabilities?
4. What support systems do teachers receive and build to facilitate mainstreaming of learners with intellectual disabilities?

5. How do lived experiences of teachers impact their teaching effectiveness and motivation?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research design*

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenological design aims to better understand the nature and significance of the lived experiences of individuals in social interactions (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014; Khan, 2014). This research aims to navigate the world of teachers to comprehend and elucidate their actual experiences working with learners with intellectual disabilities. The phenomenological design will provide insights into teachers' lived experiences of instructing learners with intellectual disabilities, focusing on training and professional development, teacher support systems, school context challenges, and stressors connected to work.

Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience (Hopkins, 2005). Understanding the essence of experiences about a certain phenomenon can only be achieved through exploring human beings' lived experiences. Phenomenology is a design of inquiry in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2014).

Moreover, now called descriptive phenomenology, this study design is one of the most commonly used methodologies in qualitative research within the social and health sciences. It is used to describe how human beings experience a certain phenomenon. The researcher asks, "What is this experience like?", "What does this experience mean?" or "How does this 'lived experience' present itself to the participant?" This attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a situation. Experience may involve perception, thought, memory, imagination, and emotion or feeling. It usually (but only sometimes) involves a small sample of 10 to 15 research participants. The analysis includes an attempt to identify themes or generalize how a particular phenomenon is perceived or experienced.

### *Locale of Study*

This study was conducted in General Santos City SPED Integrated School General Santos City. It is an educational institution with the principal objective of catering to children with learning difficulties, particularly those with learning difficulties. This school implements the DepEd guidelines for learning institutions in the Philippines; hence, it seeks to nurture students with the Learning Intervention Assistance Program (LIAP) together with other scholars who do not have any disability.

### *Respondents of the study*

The participants were selected purposively to fit certain characteristics to enhance the chances of the study documenting the experiences of educators on implementing inclusion for learners with intellectual disability in general classroom education at the General Santos City SPED Integrated School. The selected teachers must have served at least two years in the teaching profession to assist in sharing the effectiveness of practices toward participation in a diverse classroom.

### *Selection and Description of Respondents*

A purposive sampling strategy was used to obtain detailed and applicable information. The views of the concerned stakeholders were explored in depth regarding teachers' experiences implementing inclusion policies to inform the implications of the current educational context of learners with ID in usual school settings.

Ten (10) teacher participants from General Santos City SPED Integrated School were interviewed for this study. This number was considered sufficient to address the qualitative research questions. Using purposive sampling, the researcher carefully selected teachers based on the depth of their knowledge and their lived experiences in handling learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classrooms. These participants represented various grade levels and subject areas to provide diverse perspectives on inclusive education practices within the school setting.

### *Data Gathering Instruments*

The research employed a variety of techniques for data gathering to effectively construct a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences while implementing inclusive education for learners with intellectual disabilities.

One of the primary methods utilized was in-depth interview. Through an Interview Guide that was developed specifically for this study, qualitative data was gathered from all participants involved in the research. These semi-structured interviews focused on issues and accomplishments related to the implementation of inclusive education strategies. Participants, specifically teachers at the General Santos City SPED Integrated School, were encouraged to share their insights and suggestions for enhancing the support structures and staff development necessary for fostering inclusive educational policies.

In addition to interviews, classroom observations played a crucial role in data collection. The researcher visited the residences and classrooms of the research participants to observe their interactions during regular classes. Observations focused particularly on how inclusion strategies were applied and the day-to-day communication that occurred between teachers and learners. Special attention was given to the integration of students with learning disabilities into the educational process. Observational data provided valuable background information regarding the implementation of inclusive education measures within the classroom environment and enhanced the understanding of the interactions that shaped these educational experiences.

Moreover, access to relevant documents was an integral part of the data gathering procedure. The researcher reviewed both online and physical documents pertinent to the study, which provided additional context and insights into the practices surrounding inclusive education for learners with intellectual disabilities.

### *Data Analysis Procedure*

This data analysis section not only aimed to organize the collected data on teaching learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classroom settings, but also to process it in a way that made sense and was useful in extending explainable education. The subsequent steps discussed the elaborated methodology that was followed to maintain accuracy, reliability, and a holistic perspective of the general experiences of teachers from General Santos City SPED Integrated School.

Data cleaning was the first step in the analysis to ensure accurate and dependable data extraction. This involved scrutinizing the collected data to identify any inconsistencies, errors, or missing information. Ambiguous or incomplete responses were either clarified or excluded to ensure that only quality data remained, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

After data cleaning, the next step was data coding, in which responses were categorized into themes or groups relevant to the research objectives. This process involved constant comparison with the relevant literature. For instance, when the categories were based on the challenges encountered by teachers handling learners with intellectual disabilities, the strategies they used, and the support systems available, enhancing interpretation and recognition of emerging patterns. Once coding was completed, a thematic analysis of the data was conducted, with close attention paid to identifying relationships among the coded data in order to uncover trends, connections, and significant insights.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### *Integration of Learners with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Classrooms*

The profile of the respondents reveals that the total 222 participants, a little over three-fourth or The integration of learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms represents a pivotal advancement in inclusive education, emphasizing equity, empathy, and the right to quality learning for all. Based on the insights of ten special education teachers, three major themes emerged: adapting to behaviors and academic practices, functioning as normal learners, and preparing for future integration into society. These themes highlight the multifaceted benefits of inclusion, not only for learners with disabilities but for the entire school community.

One of the most significant reasons for integrating learners with intellectual disabilities is the need to help them adapt to academic expectations and behavioral norms within the mainstream classroom. Special education teachers emphasized the importance of tailoring instructional strategies to support these learners. Through differentiated instruction, the use of visual aids, peer tutoring, and hands-on activities, educators can accommodate diverse learning needs and ensure meaningful participation. These methods foster academic growth and behavioral development by exposing learners to structured and varied educational practices. Teachers also observed that peer teaching not only enhances the understanding of students with intellectual disabilities but also fosters a compassionate and cooperative classroom environment. Structured learning environments play a vital role in this process by offering predictability, individualized support, and positive reinforcement. These features help learners with intellectual disabilities build confidence, engage more actively in class, and overcome academic challenges.

Equally important is the notion of treating learners with intellectual disabilities as normal learners. Teachers stressed the value of full participation in class activities, not as passive observers but as active contributors. By encouraging equal involvement, educators reinforce the idea that these learners are capable of achieving success like their peers. Such practices help nurture self-esteem, promote independence, and challenge stereotypes about disability. This inclusive approach aligns with global and national education policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Every Student Succeeds Act, all of which advocate for equal participation, inclusive assessment, and parental involvement. Teachers play a critical role in continuously monitoring student progress and providing scaffolding and emotional support to ensure sustained engagement and achievement.

Furthermore, the integration of learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms prepares them for meaningful participation in society. Teachers noted that inclusive settings serve as real-world simulations where learners can develop communication, social, and life skills essential for future success. Activities such as group work, cooperative learning, and peer mentoring foster friendships, reduce stigma, and promote mutual respect. These experiences are crucial for developing self-advocacy and independence, empowering learners to express their needs and make informed decisions. By creating supportive environments and reinforcing positive social interactions, schools help learners with intellectual disabilities transition more smoothly into adulthood. Research also confirms that inclusive education not only benefits students with special needs but also creates a more diverse, empathetic, and engaged classroom culture for all.

In conclusion, integrating learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms is a transformative practice that enhances educational equity and social inclusion. Through adapted teaching strategies, equal participation, and preparation for life beyond school, inclusive education empowers learners with disabilities to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. The insights of special education teachers underscore the importance of intentional, structured, and compassionate approaches in making inclusive education effective. As schools continue to evolve, the commitment to inclusive practices must be upheld by educators, administrators, and policymakers to ensure that every learner is given the opportunity to reach their full potential.

#### *Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching Learners with Intellectual Disabilities*

The integration of learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms introduces a variety of challenges for special education teachers, particularly in relation to communication and the availability of resources. Based on interviews with experienced educators, two prominent themes emerged: problems with communication skills and a lack of resources and support. These challenges significantly impact the ability of teachers to deliver effective and inclusive instruction, as well as the ability of students with disabilities to engage meaningfully in the learning environment.

Communication difficulties stand as a central challenge in inclusive education. Many learners with intellectual disabilities struggle to articulate their thoughts and comprehend instructions, leading to frustration for both students and teachers. This gap in communication disrupts classroom interactions and often results in disengagement, hindering the students' academic and social progress. Teachers reported difficulties in ensuring that instructions are understood and that students can adequately express their needs and responses. SPED T4 noted that some learners find it hard to express themselves or follow directions, while SPED T5 shared how collaborative work with a speech therapist and the use of assistive technologies significantly improved one student's ability to engage. Another educator, SPED T6, implemented a multisensory approach—including visual aids and phonics-based activities—to help a student struggling with reading and writing, highlighting how individual interventions are often necessary to address communication barriers.

These difficulties extend beyond academic comprehension to social integration. Learners with communication challenges often face isolation, as they struggle to form friendships or participate in peer interactions. This was observed by the researcher during classroom visits, where students with special needs appeared withdrawn or less active compared to their peers. Mutumburanzou (2018) supports this observation, stating that children with severe learning disabilities, especially those who cannot speak, are often less inquisitive and more socially

withdrawn. Communication challenges thus form a significant barrier to both educational success and social inclusion.

In addition to communication issues, the lack of resources and support poses a substantial obstacle to the success of inclusive education. Many schools, especially those in underfunded districts, lack the financial capacity to provide necessary accommodations for students with disabilities. This includes assistive technologies, adapted learning materials, and additional support staff—all essential for meeting the diverse needs of learners in inclusive settings. The researcher observed that limited funding impedes schools' ability to offer specialized tools, resulting in restricted access to appropriate accommodations. SPED participants echoed this concern, with one stating that schools need sufficient funding to purchase necessary tools and another highlighting the impact of budget constraints on classroom accommodations and teacher preparedness.

This scarcity of resources is not only financial but also structural. Teachers often face a shortage of instructional materials, assistive devices, and even basic support services that are crucial in facilitating inclusive education. UNESCO (2017a) identified limited resources and inadequate teacher training as key obstacles to inclusive education. Adams and Lok (2022) further noted that without proper allocation of resources, both instruction quality and curriculum accessibility are compromised. Teachers are left to manage diverse learning needs without sufficient support, increasing their workload and limiting their effectiveness.

Language barriers also present an additional challenge, particularly in multilingual contexts. As one teacher shared, delivering lessons in Filipino was complicated by the fact that many students primarily spoke English, requiring constant translation and slowing down the pace of instruction. This reflects the broader need for culturally and linguistically responsive teaching strategies within inclusive classrooms.

Ultimately, while the integration of learners with intellectual disabilities holds transformative potential, the challenges highlighted by educators reveal the need for systemic improvements. Addressing communication difficulties requires a combination of speech therapy, assistive technology, individualized instruction, and ongoing professional development. Simultaneously, solving resource gaps necessitates increased funding, policy reform, and strategic allocation of materials and support personnel. As research and experience suggest, inclusive education can only thrive when supported by a robust framework that empowers teachers and meets the diverse needs of all learners.

### *Strategies and interventions teachers employ to effectively integrate learners with intellectual disabilities*

Integrating learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream educational settings requires the application of specialized strategies and interventions to ensure that all students can thrive. Through interviews with special education teachers, five key themes emerged that highlight effective practices used to foster inclusion and enhance the learning experience of students with intellectual disabilities: differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, group activities, structured routines, and personalized learning plans. These strategies collectively promote academic achievement, social integration, and emotional development in inclusive classrooms.

Differentiated instruction emerged as a cornerstone strategy for inclusive education. This approach involves tailoring content, teaching methods, and learning products based on each student's readiness, interests, and learning profile. Special education teachers emphasized the

importance of recognizing the diverse needs of learners and adapting lessons accordingly. By breaking down complex concepts, using visual aids, and incorporating interactive learning activities, teachers create accessible and engaging instruction. Participants explained how this method improves academic outcomes and nurtures skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulation. Differentiated instruction also encourages students to work at their own pace and in ways aligned with their strengths, promoting a sense of belonging and reducing stigma (Mbua, 2023; Idowu, 2024). Flexible grouping and technology integration further support this strategy by enabling collaboration and providing multiple avenues for content delivery.

Another widely adopted strategy is peer tutoring. This intervention benefits both the student with intellectual disabilities and their peer tutor by facilitating personalized instruction and immediate feedback. Teachers noted that students with disabilities tend to respond more positively to their peers than to authority figures, often feeling less shy and more willing to engage. Beyond academic support, peer tutoring also fosters empathy, friendship, and social inclusion. Educators described identifying students who not only excel academically but also demonstrate patience and kindness—ideal qualities for peer tutors. Research has confirmed that peer tutoring can significantly improve learning outcomes in areas such as reading and mathematics (Johnson, 2019; Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). Nevertheless, successful implementation requires thoughtful preparation, including tutor training and ongoing teacher supervision to maintain positive peer dynamics and ensure effective support.

Group activities were also identified as essential in promoting inclusive education. Through cooperative learning, students are encouraged to collaborate, share ideas, and build relationships. These interactions not only support academic performance but also contribute to the development of vital interpersonal skills such as communication and conflict resolution. Teachers reported using flexible grouping and tailoring activities to match student interests and abilities, enhancing motivation and engagement. Participants shared that these group interactions help students with intellectual disabilities become more active and confident in class, boosting their self-esteem and improving their performance. Group activities align with the broader goal of 21st-century education, which emphasizes collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking (Sweet & Michaelsen, 2023).

Structured routines were highlighted as another critical strategy for creating a predictable and supportive learning environment. Predictability helps reduce anxiety and enhances focus among students with intellectual disabilities. Teachers implement step-by-step instructions, real-life examples, and multisensory learning to help students comprehend lessons more effectively. Establishing routines not only supports learning but also contributes to classroom management and emotional stability. Educators observed that simplified tasks and familiar activities made lessons more relatable and accessible to students, helping them connect learning to their everyday experiences.

Finally, the use of Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) emerged as a powerful tool in tailoring instruction to individual student needs. While not a substitute for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), PLPs offer a flexible and student-centered approach that works alongside existing special education frameworks. Teachers reported success using PLPs that included one-on-one tutoring, simplified materials, and real-life applications to support students struggling in specific subjects like math and language. PLPs empower teachers to address each student's strengths, challenges, and learning preferences more effectively, leading to better academic outcomes and increased motivation (Tenon & Epler, 2020; Lively, 2023; Stefhani & Arbi, 2025). Observations also revealed that many educators use a variety of targeted strategies—

such as co-teaching, assistive technology, and visual aids—to complement PLPs and enhance curriculum access for all students.

In conclusion, the integration of learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms is made possible through the thoughtful application of multiple instructional strategies and interventions. Differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, group activities, structured routines, and personalized learning plans collectively form a comprehensive framework that promotes inclusivity, equity, and academic success. These strategies not only address the diverse needs of learners but also foster a classroom culture that values diversity, empathy, and collaboration. For inclusive education to be effective and sustainable, continued support, training, and resource allocation for teachers are essential.

*Support System teachers received to facilitate the mainstreaming of learners with intellectual disabilities.*

Mainstreaming learners with intellectual disabilities requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, with teachers playing a pivotal role in shaping inclusive learning environments. These educators not only rely on existing support systems but also actively build and reinforce mechanisms that promote the successful integration of students with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms. Based on teacher interviews and classroom observations, three primary themes emerged concerning the support systems that facilitate inclusion: administrative support and recognition, access to resources and instructional materials, and professional development and continuous learning. These components collectively form the backbone of effective inclusive practices, ensuring that both educators and learners are equipped to thrive.

Administrative support and recognition serve as the foundational layer for fostering inclusive education. Teachers emphasized that the presence of empathetic, proactive administrators significantly boosts their morale, job satisfaction, and capacity to manage diverse classrooms. This support goes beyond the provision of supplies and includes policy implementation, emotional encouragement, and problem-solving collaboration. Teachers shared the importance of having access to assistive technologies, adapted learning materials, and modules tailored to various grade levels. These resources are essential for planning differentiated lessons and supporting students with unique learning needs. Furthermore, administrative offices are responsible for organizing these materials, maintaining essential equipment, and anticipating the evolving demands of inclusive classrooms. Schools that champion inclusion also develop and enforce clear policies that protect learners with disabilities, ensuring they are treated equitably and included meaningfully. Teachers such as SPED T10 noted that these school-based policies help them navigate inclusive practices confidently and systematically.

Equally crucial is access to professional development and continuous learning, which empowers teachers with the knowledge, strategies, and confidence to effectively meet the diverse needs of their students. Teachers reported that existing training programs often fall short, focusing predominantly on general education without adequately addressing the specialized needs of students with intellectual disabilities. This gap results in many educators feeling unprepared and overwhelmed. To bridge this divide, educators advocated for more focused training in areas such as differentiated instruction, behavior management, and assistive technology. SPED teachers expressed a strong desire for workshops and seminars tailored to inclusive education, underscoring that such training would not only improve their instructional practices but also enhance student outcomes. Additionally, collaborative professional learning—through peer mentoring,

professional learning communities, and shared planning sessions—was highlighted as a powerful tool for maintaining instructional excellence and staying current with inclusive education policies and research. As Zamiri and Esmaeili (2024) emphasized, educators who continuously engage in collaborative learning are better equipped to integrate innovative teaching approaches and respond to dynamic classroom challenges.

Together, these support systems underscore the importance of a sustained, institutional commitment to inclusive education. Administrative leadership, resource availability, and professional development must be harmonized to empower teachers in fulfilling their role as inclusive educators. This holistic framework not only improves teaching effectiveness but also enhances the educational experience of learners with intellectual disabilities, ensuring that mainstream classrooms become truly inclusive, equitable, and supportive environments.

### *Impact of teachers' lived experiences on their teaching effectiveness and motivations*

The lived experiences of special education (SPED) teachers profoundly influence their teaching effectiveness and motivation, particularly in inclusive classroom settings. These experiences shape how teachers understand student needs, adapt to classroom dynamics, and respond to the challenges of inclusive education. Through their direct engagement with diverse learners, SPED teachers develop greater empathy, resilience, and adaptability, allowing them to implement strategies that foster meaningful learning for all students. Three key themes emerged from the investigation into these experiences: appreciation of inclusive education, strengthened patience, and the ability to adapt teaching methods to diverse learners. These interconnected dimensions underscore how personal and professional experiences serve as a catalyst for educator growth and commitment.

A deep appreciation of inclusive education stands out as a central theme in teachers' narratives. For many educators, working with learners with intellectual disabilities has expanded their understanding of the value of inclusion—not only as a teaching philosophy but as a fundamental right and a vehicle for social transformation. Teachers reported that their experiences in inclusive classrooms have revealed how students of all abilities can thrive when given the appropriate support. SPED T10, for instance, emphasized that inclusive education has shown them the potential of every learner, reinforcing their belief in the importance of equitable educational opportunities. Similarly, SPED T8 shared how their perspective and emotional connection to learners have deepened, leading to more compassionate and responsive teaching. This growing appreciation often serves as a powerful motivator, inspiring teachers to continue improving their skills and advocating for inclusive practices.

Closely tied to this appreciation is the theme of strengthened patience, which emerges as both a challenge and a transformative outcome of working in inclusive settings. Inclusive education requires an exceptional degree of patience, as teachers must navigate varying learning paces, behavioral differences, and social-emotional needs. SPED teachers like T2 and T4 acknowledged how these experiences honed their ability to remain flexible and persistent, ultimately shaping them into more empathetic and effective educators. Patience allows teachers to create supportive classroom environments where students feel understood and valued, and where meaningful learning can occur at an individualized pace. This theme highlights how patience is not only necessary for managing day-to-day classroom activities but also serves as a cornerstone of teachers' professional growth and personal fulfillment.

The third major theme, the ability to adapt teaching methods to diverse learners, illustrates the critical link between experience and instructional innovation. Teachers recounted how their

exposure to learners with a wide range of intellectual, behavioral, and linguistic needs pushed them to continuously refine and individualize their teaching approaches. SPED T1 and T7 reflected on how adapting their instruction to each student's pace and interests was essential for fostering engagement and comprehension. These adaptive strategies include differentiated instruction, student-centered learning, and the integration of assistive technologies. As noted by SPED T3, working in inclusive classrooms also strengthens collaboration skills and encourages the development of creative, personalized learning experiences. The capacity to adapt not only increases teacher efficacy but also enhances student outcomes, leading to greater classroom cohesion and overall satisfaction for both teachers and learners.

Together, these themes reveal that the lived experiences of SPED teachers serve as a rich foundation for professional development, motivation, and instructional excellence. Teachers who develop a deep appreciation for inclusion, cultivate patience, and continuously adapt their methods demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy and job satisfaction. This, in turn, supports greater persistence and engagement in the demanding field of special education. Research supports these findings, showing that teachers with strong beliefs in inclusive practices are more intrinsically motivated and better equipped to meet the complex needs of their students (Woodcock et al., 2023; Saroyan, 2021). By drawing on their lived experiences, SPED teachers not only enhance their own effectiveness but also contribute to building more inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational environments for all learners.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the study's findings, the integration of learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms is a multidimensional endeavor that goes beyond simple placement. Its core aim is to help learners adapt to typical academic and behavioral expectations while preserving their individuality, ultimately preparing them for meaningful participation in society. Authentic inclusion requires educational systems to cultivate supportive environments that develop essential skills without erasing the unique identities of learners. Thus, true integration fosters not only adaptation but also acceptance within the broader community.

However, the process is not without challenges. Teachers frequently encounter communication difficulties and a lack of resources, which heighten stress and underscore the importance of individualized instruction. These challenges signal a pressing need for educational institutions and policymakers to equip teachers with sufficient training, classroom resources, and sustained support. The presence of individualized education plans (IEPs) becomes critical in managing the complex needs of diverse learners, helping to ensure that no student is left behind due to systemic inadequacies.

Effective integration is anchored in the use of differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, group activities, structured routines, and personalized learning plans. These strategies enhance both academic engagement and social inclusion by addressing individual learning preferences and promoting cooperative interactions. This highlights the necessity for educational institutions to invest in teacher training focused on inclusive and adaptive instructional methods. Moreover, creating predictable, organized classroom structures and peer-supported learning experiences helps foster an inclusive environment where all students can thrive.

Mainstreaming also relies heavily on robust support systems, including administrative leadership, access to professional development, collaboration with specialists, and involvement from parents and the wider community. A successful inclusive framework must be systemic,

requiring school leaders to actively cultivate a supportive culture, allocate necessary resources, and establish inclusive policies that empower both educators and learners.

Finally, the lived experiences of teachers significantly influence their effectiveness and motivation. Educators expressed a deepened appreciation for inclusive education, strengthened patience, and an enhanced ability to adapt their teaching methods to diverse needs. Despite these professional growth outcomes, teachers also reported emotional strain and heavy workloads. This underscores the need for initiatives that support teachers' well-being, reduce burnout, and create sustainable teaching conditions. Providing targeted professional development focused on inclusive practices and emotional resilience is essential to further empower educators and ensure long-term success in mainstreaming efforts.

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