

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS AT ASPEN MIDDLE SCHOOL: A BASIS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH ARTICLE

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms at Aspen Middle School, Colorado. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five general education teachers to understand their perceptions, challenges, level of preparedness, and strategies for supporting diverse learners. Findings indicate three essential requirements for successful inclusive education: first, teachers value a consistent and specialized discipline system to manage challenging behaviors influenced by students' family backgrounds; second, teachers must be fully equipped with adequate teaching materials and specialized facilities to address the differentiated needs of learners; and third, teachers demonstrate strong commitment to data-driven lesson planning, ensuring instruction enhances every student's capabilities. These results highlight the importance of prioritizing teacher preparation before inclusive programs begin, providing systemic support through resources and facilities, and fostering strong teacher engagement and pedagogical commitment. The study further supports the development of professional development training designed to strengthen teachers' capacity to implement inclusive education effectively and promote equitable learning outcomes for all students.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education, General Education Teachers, Professional Development, Diverse Learners

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a central principle in contemporary educational systems, responding to the growing diversity of learners within classrooms. It is an educational framework that addresses a broad spectrum of student needs by adapting teaching methods, instructional strategies, and curricula to ensure meaningful participation for all learners (Pijl et al., 1997). At its core, inclusive education emphasizes equity and access, asserting that all students should be provided with equal learning opportunities regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or circumstances (United Nations, 2006).

Educational systems have historically categorized and labeled learners based on perceived differences, often because schools were not originally designed to accommodate diversity (Davis & Florian, 2004). This practice has reinforced exclusion rather than participation. In contrast, the inclusive education paradigm reframes learner differences not as deficits but as natural variations that enrich the learning environment (Florian, 2014). Within this framework, teachers play a critical role as key implementers of inclusive practices, particularly general education teachers who work directly with diverse learners in mainstream classrooms (Florian, 2014).

Inclusive education extends beyond the placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. It encompasses a broader commitment to social justice by ensuring that all learners—regardless of disability, socioeconomic status, language background, or life experiences—are supported equitably. This includes learners who may be orphans, refugees, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, or those learning in a language that is not their first (Demirkol, 2023). These intersecting factors often intensify learning challenges and demand responsive and flexible teaching practices.

General education teachers, however, frequently report limited knowledge of special education laws, policies, and inclusive instructional strategies, despite their central role in educating students with diverse needs. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 mandates that learners with disabilities be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate in the least restrictive environment. For many students, this environment is the general education classroom, placing heightened responsibility on general education teachers to meet varied academic and behavioral needs (Patterson, 2005).

Despite policy support for inclusion, the realities of inclusive classroom implementation often present significant challenges for teachers. These challenges may include insufficient training, lack of instructional resources, large class sizes, and limited professional support. Understanding how general education teachers navigate these complexities is essential for strengthening inclusive practices and ensuring equitable access to learning.

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms at Aspen Middle School. Specifically, it aims to examine the challenges they encounter, the strategies and adaptations they employ, and their perceptions and beliefs regarding inclusive education. Using a qualitative approach, this research captures teachers' firsthand experiences as they work to accommodate students with and without disabilities. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights into teachers' professional development needs and the types of support required to effectively implement inclusive education. Moreover, this study offers an opportunity to examine how national, state, and local inclusive education policies are translated into classroom practice, helping to identify gaps between policy intentions and actual implementation.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To explore the perceptions of general education teachers regarding inclusive education in inclusive classrooms at Aspen Middle School.

- To identify the challenges encountered by general education teachers in implementing inclusive education.
- To examine how general education teachers perceive their level of preparedness for inclusive teaching.
- To describe the strategies employed by general education teachers to address the diverse learning needs of students in inclusive classrooms.
- To propose a professional development training program for general education teachers based on their lived experiences in inclusive classrooms.

1.2 Research Gap

The research gap in this study lies in the limited school-based qualitative investigations that focus on the lived experiences of general education teachers implementing inclusive education in public middle school settings. While existing literature strongly supports inclusive education as a means of promoting equity and access for diverse learners (UNESCO, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), much of the research has concentrated on policy frameworks, teacher attitudes, and general challenges associated with inclusion rather than on teachers' firsthand classroom experiences within specific institutional contexts.

Previous studies have identified key issues such as insufficient training, lack of instructional resources, emotional strain, and limited professional support as major challenges faced by general education teachers in inclusive classrooms (Sharma et al., 2012; Odom et al., 2011; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2007). However, these studies often rely on survey-based or mixed-method approaches and do not fully capture the depth of teachers' perceptions, coping strategies, and instructional adaptations as they navigate inclusive practices on a daily basis.

Moreover, while research has highlighted the importance of professional development in improving teachers' preparedness and attitudes toward inclusive education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Round et al., 2015), there remains a lack of context-specific studies that use teachers' lived experiences as the primary basis for designing professional development training programs. In particular, few studies examine how national, state, and local inclusive education policies are interpreted and enacted at the classroom level in individual middle schools.

This study seeks to address these gaps by employing a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms at Aspen Middle School. By focusing on teachers' perceptions, challenges, preparedness, and instructional strategies, this research aims to generate context-driven insights that can inform the development of responsive professional development training and help bridge the gap between inclusive education policy and classroom practice.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education promotes the belief that all learners, regardless of their abilities, have the right to be educated in mainstream settings alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate based on their individual needs. UNESCO (2020) affirms that inclusive education is essential in achieving quality education for all. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) describe inclusive pedagogy as extending what is ordinarily available to all learners, shifting the focus from individual deficits to teaching practices that accommodate diversity within the classroom.

However, general education teachers often experience difficulties in adjusting teaching strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012) found that insufficient training and limited support systems contribute to teachers' anxiety and resistance toward inclusive practices. Similarly, Odom, Buysse, and Soukakou (2011) highlighted emotional strain and uncertainty among teachers who are not adequately equipped to implement inclusive instruction.

Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are strongly influenced by their level of preparation and perceived competence. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) noted that positive attitudes toward inclusion are more likely when teachers receive sufficient support, have prior experience working with students with disabilities, and believe in their own teaching abilities. Ignatovitch and Smantser (2015) emphasized that the successful implementation of inclusive education depends largely on teachers, who are responsible for the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development of learners with special educational needs in inclusive settings.

Professional development plays a vital role in supporting teachers in inclusive classrooms. Mizell (2010) defined professional development as any educational experience related to a person's work. In the academic setting, professional development refers to structured learning opportunities designed to enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and instructional practices (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Despite this, many teachers remain inadequately trained to handle inclusive classrooms, which negatively affects their confidence and attitudes toward inclusion (Casale-Giannola, 2011).

Studies conducted in the United States reveal similar concerns among teachers. Scruggs and Mastropieri (2007), in their meta-analysis, found that while teachers generally support the concept of inclusion, they expressed concerns regarding lack of planning time, insufficient training, and unclear co-teaching roles. Horne and Timmons (2009) further emphasized that emotional resilience and professional support systems are critical in helping teachers cope with the demands of inclusive education.

Research focusing on teachers' lived experiences reinforces these findings. Santos and Aquino (2018) reported that general education teachers experienced emotional exhaustion, role ambiguity, and lack of administrative support in inclusive classrooms, although many remained committed to inclusive values. Rivera and Santiago (2022) also found that teachers agreed with the philosophy of inclusion but expressed concerns about the lack of clear guidelines and culturally responsive instructional materials.

Research has consistently shown that teachers who receive training in inclusive practices benefit all learners, not only students with disabilities (Garrison-Wade, 2012; Marom & Weintraub, 2015). Round, Subban, and Sharma (2015) found that teachers with minimal or no training in inclusive education experienced higher levels of anxiety compared to those who had attended professional development programs.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that general education teachers' lived experiences in inclusive classrooms are shaped by systemic factors such as training, administrative support, and policy implementation. While inclusive education policies promote equity and access, a gap remains between policy intentions and classroom practice. This gap highlights the need for qualitative research that explores teachers' lived experiences in inclusive settings. Understanding these experiences is essential in identifying professional development needs and strengthening support mechanisms to enhance inclusive education practices, particularly in public middle schools such as Aspen Middle School.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms at Aspen Middle School in Aspen, Colorado. The phenomenological approach was used to capture teachers' perceptions, challenges, preparedness, and instructional strategies in accommodating diverse learners, including students with disabilities. Purposive sampling was utilized to select six (6) licensed general education teachers who had at least one year of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms and were currently handling students in Grades 5–8. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted during the academic year, either in person or through a secure virtual platform. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis process, which involved coding, theme development, and interpretation of shared meanings across participants' experiences. Ethical considerations were strictly observed through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymization of data, and secure storage of all research materials.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis and discussion of data derived from semi-structured interviews with general education teachers at Aspen Middle School. The resulting themes capture their perceptions, challenges, preparation, instructional strategies, and recommendations for professional development, and are discussed in relation to relevant literature.

Theme 1: General Education Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education

General education teachers at Aspen Middle School described their experiences preparing for and delivering lessons in inclusive classrooms as deeply shaped by their awareness of learners' unique needs. They emphasized the importance of understanding learners' diagnosis and prognosis, often documented in anecdotal records, as these provide first-hand information to support students with diverse or deviant learning needs. Teachers noted that such records guide instructional decisions and help address challenges that arise during inclusive education. Due to limited training, teachers reported that lesson delivery often remained more teacher-centered, despite recognizing the benefits of student-centered approaches. Kochung (2021) highlighted that inadequate training of special education professionals is a key obstacle to inclusive education, reinforcing the teachers' view that proper preparation is crucial before engaging in inclusive classrooms.

Teachers also highlighted the role of stakeholders, particularly parents and medically related professionals, in enhancing lesson delivery and sustaining an inclusive pedagogical environment. They valued pre-assessments and post-assessments, such as diagnostic and prognostic tools, to support learners' ease and engagement. This aligns with Bolotaolo (2019), who emphasized the essential role of regular teachers in implementing Inclusive Education Programs (IEPs) and fostering acceptance of all learners. Furthermore, strong leadership and collaborative support from school heads and stakeholders were seen as critical in addressing learners' diverse needs and sustaining positive working environments, consistent with Allam and Martin (2021).

Theme 2: Challenges Faced by General Education Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

General education teachers at Aspen Middle School described facing significant challenges in accommodating learners with diverse needs within inclusive classrooms. They emphasized that classroom facilities, teaching materials, and age-appropriate interventions are often insufficient to fully support students with special needs. Managing disruptive or undesirable behaviors while ensuring all learners remain engaged adds to the complexity of lesson delivery. Teachers noted that individualized education plans (IEPs) require careful attention, yet balancing these with core curriculum demands can be overwhelming. Kreitz-Sandberg (2021) highlighted that inadequate working conditions and limited resources hinder teachers' ability to meet the diverse needs of inclusive classrooms, reinforcing the importance of fully equipping educators with materials, training, and appropriate facilities.

Despite these challenges, teachers stressed the necessity of providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. They reported that schools must offer sufficient support and accommodations, including specialized resources and professional development, to enable learners' success in general education settings (Bui et al., 2020; Llego, 2022). Lyons et. al (2019) further emphasized that effective inclusive education requires the interplay of students' motivation, teaching skills, curriculum demands, and physical resources. Teachers recognized that collaboration with stakeholders, ongoing support from school leadership, and proactive planning are crucial to sustaining a positive and inclusive learning environment, allowing students with diverse needs to access education meaningfully and thrive academically.

Theme 3: General Education Teachers' Perceived Preparations for Inclusive Teaching

General education teachers at Aspen Middle School recognized that their preparation plays a crucial role in delivering effective lessons in inclusive classrooms. They emphasized the importance of understanding learners' diagnosis and prognosis, often recorded in anecdotal notes, as these provide first-hand insight into students' diverse needs. Such documentation guides teachers in managing challenges and planning instruction, particularly when navigating the balance between teacher-centered approaches and the goal of engaging all learners. Kochung (2021) highlights that inadequate training of special education professionals can hinder inclusive education, reinforcing the teachers' view that preparation must be carefully addressed before they are placed in inclusive settings.

Teachers also stressed the value of collaboration with stakeholders, including parents and medically related professionals, to support lesson delivery and maintain a responsive learning environment. Pre-assessments and post-assessments, along with anecdotal records, help ensure learners feel at ease and supported during inclusive activities. Bolotaolo (2019) affirmed that regular classroom teachers are vital in implementing Inclusive Education Programs (IEPs) and fostering acceptance of all students regardless of ability. Additionally, strong support from school heads and active stakeholder involvement sustains a positive environment that enables teachers to innovate and meet the diverse needs of learners, consistent with the guidance of Allam and Martin (2021).

Theme 4: General Education Teachers' Employed Strategies to Address the Diverse Needs of Students

The general education teachers at Aspen Middle School employed various strategies to address the diverse needs of students, emphasizing classroom arrangements and behavior management. For instance, seating placement was deliberately organized to support students'

learning and behavioral needs, such as positioning students with learning difficulties or hyperactive behaviors near the teacher's table or doorway. The discipline system was integral to promoting cooperation and supporting learners' autonomy, ensuring that all students, regardless of ability or behavior, had equitable access to learning. Lyons (2019) highlighted that learning is a complex interplay of student motivation, physical facilities, teaching resources, and instructional skills, reinforcing the need for strategic accommodations in inclusive classrooms.

Teachers also emphasized the importance of meticulous planning, professional resilience, and innovative approaches to maximize student engagement and learning outcomes. Dizon (2021) stressed that comprehensive inclusive education requires more than workshops; it demands high standards of planning and resource provision to meet diverse learner needs. Despite challenges such as limited preparation and specialized expertise, teachers persisted in adapting instructional strategies, providing individualized support, and utilizing available resources. Macabenta et al. (2023) and Zerrudo (2022) similarly underscored the necessity of ongoing teacher education, access to instructional aids, and progress monitoring to sustain effective inclusive practices and optimize learning for all students.

Theme 5: Recommended Professional Development Training

The general education teachers at Aspen Middle School emphasized the need for comprehensive professional development training to support effective inclusive education. They highlighted that sufficient teaching and learning resources, specialized facilities, and stakeholder support are crucial to ensure that teachers can identify and address diverse learner needs. The school head's leadership and active stakeholder engagement were seen as vital in creating a supportive environment for inclusive practices. Teachers also underscored the importance of training for parents and families of learners, noting that these sessions are often left unevaluated or underdeveloped, despite their potential to enhance student learning and engagement. Bui et al. (2020) emphasized that inclusive education requires high-quality instruction and interventions that enable all learners, regardless of challenges, to succeed in the core curriculum.

Moreover, teachers recognized that inclusive education is not merely about placing students in mainstream classrooms but about adapting schools to respond to all learners' needs. Mittler (2022) argued that inclusion entails preparing teachers to take responsibility for all students' learning and to develop instructional activities that cater to diverse needs. In line with this, the teachers recommended professional development programs that focus on pedagogical skills, specialized knowledge, and practical strategies to enhance lesson delivery, support students' individual learning profiles, and sustain an inclusive and equitable classroom environment.

5. Research Future Opportunities

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of general education teachers in implementing inclusive education at Aspen Middle School, several areas highlight the need for further investigation:

- **Longitudinal Studies on Teacher Experiences:** Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to explore how teachers' perceptions, preparedness, and strategies evolve over time as they gain experience in inclusive classrooms.

- **Effectiveness of Professional Development Programs:** Studies assessing the impact of specific professional development trainings on teachers' confidence, instructional strategies, and student outcomes would help identify best practices for supporting inclusive education.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration:** Further research is needed to examine the role of parents, families, and medically related professionals in sustaining inclusive pedagogical environments and how their active participation influences both teacher practices and student success.
- **Resource Allocation and Facilities:** Investigating how the availability and quality of teaching materials, classroom facilities, and specialized support services affect inclusive education implementation could inform policy and school-level planning.
- **Teacher-Centered vs. Student-Centered Approaches:** Research exploring the balance between teacher-directed and student-centered strategies in inclusive classrooms could provide deeper understanding of how instructional methods impact learners with diverse needs.

6. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of general education teachers in implementing inclusive education at Aspen Middle School. Findings reveal that teachers recognize the importance of structured discipline systems, adequate teaching materials, and specialized facilities to effectively meet the diverse needs of learners. Additionally, pre-assessments, post-assessments, and anecdotal records such as diagnostic and prognostic tools are essential in guiding lesson delivery and supporting individualized learning. Teachers also noted that inclusive practices enhance student cooperation, autonomous learning, and differentiated capabilities, even amidst challenges arising from varied learner backgrounds and behaviors.

The analysis highlights that teacher preparation, professional development, and stakeholder support are critical for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Despite occasional reliance on teacher-centered approaches, engagement practices and adaptive strategies enable teachers to address students' diverse needs and promote equitable learning opportunities. These findings underscore the necessity of a holistic, well-resourced, and collaborative approach supported by school leadership and families – to sustain inclusive practices, optimize student outcomes, and uphold the principles of quality education for all learners.

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