

Exploring Teachers' Preparedness and School Practices in Mainstreaming Learners with Special Education Needs

Arlene S. Perez¹, Husna T. Lumapenet², Harris M. Sinolinding³

¹ Teacher III, Department of Education, Lapan Elementary School, Perez, Kidapawan City

² Associate Professor, Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology

³ Professor, Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore teachers' preparedness and school practices in mainstreaming learners with special education needs. A descriptive-phenomenological design was used to explore the lived experiences of teachers and administrators concerning the inclusion of students with special educational needs. Thematic analysis was employed to discern key themes and patterns (Merriam, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2019). In-depth interview was administered to 12 elementary school teachers of different schools handling mainstreamed learners with special education within the juridical territory under DepEd Region XII. The identified respondents are currently engaged with mainstreamed learners with special education needs. For qualitative analysis of the interview data, thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was employed. This method involved a systematic coding process to identify recurrent themes and patterns across the narratives of teacher-respondents. The analysis focused on capturing: How do teachers experience in relation to their teacher preparedness influenced their ability to teach mainstreamed learners with special education needs; what school practices find most supportive in helping mainstreamed learners with special education needs succeed; and in what ways teachers effectively collaborate with other staff members to support mainstreamed learners with special education needs? There are three (3) themes on effective ways to ensure better performance of mainstreamed learners with special educational needs that are consistent or generally or basically affirmed by the respondents, namely: collaboration among staff members, family engagement and school goals. While the less general and typical responses have bearing on this study, the researcher attempts to narrow down on the general themes that need closer attention and focused response. Collaboration among staff, strong family engagement, and well-defined school goals emerge as essential themes for ensuring the success of mainstreamed learners with special education needs. By fostering a collaborative school environment, actively engaging families, and setting clear goals, teachers can create an inclusive learning experience that is supportive and empowers all students to grow. Result also shows the general themes for Supportive School Practices: Facilitating Success for Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs. There are four (4) themes that are consistent or generally affirmed by the respondents, namely: Teacher Training and Development; Differentiated Instruction and Resources; Regular Monitoring and Assessment; and Empowerment and Inclusion.

Keyword: - Teachers' preparedness, school practices, mainstreaming learners with special education needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers are widely recognized as society's primary educators, pivotal in educating all students, including those with special needs. However, many teachers feel ill-equipped to support these students, a concern amplified by the rising number of mainstreamed learners with special needs. Hayden (2016) highlights education's evolving nature, stressing the need for teachers to continuously adapt their approaches to meet student needs (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hayden, 2016).

Research on teacher preparedness and school practices reveals a notable gap. While programs should address a broad spectrum of topics including disabilities, teaching strategies, and evidence-based practices (Friend & Cook, 2018; National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2017), studies on inclusive education often concentrate on specific interventions like co-teaching or differentiated instruction (Bryant, 2017).

However, some studies have acknowledged the need for more focused attention on the complex demands of mainstreamed learners with special education needs if higher levels of academic success are to be achieved (Salovitis & Griskenas, 2019). This is corroborated by Artiles and Trent (2023), who state that while they acknowledge challenges in mainstreaming, the benefits of adapting specific, customized, and creative strategies for supporting mainstreamed learners far outweigh the former.

Special education has ever-evolving strategies in instruction, research breakthroughs, and technical requirements that correspond to the ever-evolving needs of learners (De Leon, 2022). The impact of teacher preparedness and school practices on the performance of mainstreamed learners with special education needs elicits more research on their long-term outcomes (Gresham & Lopez, 2017).

This paper, however modest, attempts to address specific gaps in the effectiveness of existing teacher preparation programs and school practices and their impact on the performance of mainstreamed learners with SEN.

2. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive-phenomenological design was used to explore the lived experiences of teachers and administrators concerning the inclusion of students with special educational needs. Thematic analysis was employed to discern key themes and patterns (Merriam, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2019). In-depth interview was administered to 12 elementary school teachers of different schools handling mainstreamed learners with special education within the juridical territory under DepEd Region XII. The identified respondents are currently engaged with mainstreamed learners with special education needs. For qualitative analysis of the interview data, thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was employed. This method involved a systematic coding process to identify recurrent themes and patterns across the narratives of teacher-respondents.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Experiences in Teacher Preparation Influence their Ability to Teach Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs

Result shows the global theme, organizing themes and basic themes on Exploring Experiences in Preparing to Teach Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs. There are three (3) themes on effective ways to ensure better performance of mainstreamed Learners with SEN that are consistent or generally or basically affirmed by the respondents, namely: collaboration among staff members, family engagement and school goals. While the less general and typical responses have bearing on this study, the researcher attempts to narrow down on the general themes that need closer attention and focused response.

Global Theme

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

In the world of education, for teacher respondents in this study and for students too with diverse needs, the all-encompassing theme of creating a supportive learning environment emerges as the unifying concept for the two key organizing themes: collaboration and support, and school culture and practices. Research consistently underscores the crucial role of a supportive environment in fostering student success (Ainscow, 2016; Mitra, 2023). While collaboration and support, along with school culture and practices, represent distinct but interrelated themes, they ultimately converge to create a supportive learning environment. This environment serves as the cornerstone for ensuring student reaching fuller potential and success within a diverse learning community.

Organizing Themes

Collaboration and Support

Within the context of mainstreaming learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN), collaboration and support are highlighted as pivotal themes. This entails fostering collaboration among staff members and promoting family engagement to facilitate successful mainstreaming. Schools can establish a unified support system by prioritizing collaboration among staff and involving families in the educational process (Getting Smart, 2018; Friend & Cook, 2018). This collaborative approach ultimately contributes to the academic achievement, social-emotional well-being, and overall success of SEN learners within the mainstream classroom (Mitra, 2023).

School Culture and Practices

School culture, akin to any culture, encompasses shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that shape the school environment (Ainscow, 2016). A positive and inclusive school culture cultivates a sense of belonging, collaboration, and high expectations for all students. Such a culture influences student motivation, engagement, and academic performance positively (Guskey, 2017).

Conversely, a negative school culture characterized by low expectations or inadequate support can hinder students' progress towards achieving their goals. It is evident that school goals alone are insufficient for success; the underlying school culture and practices are instrumental in translating these goals into tangible outcomes (Ainscow, 2016).

Basic Themes

Collaboration Among Staff Members

The respondents generally articulated collaboration among staff members with core ideas like productive collaboration among teachers and staff members. For them it is crucial in supporting mainstreamed learners with special education needs. Another idea that surfaced was the positive and encouraging experience on regular meetings, conferences, and formal venues like SLAC (School Learning Action Cells). They help facilitate sharing of experiences, insights, and strategies in handling learners with special needs. Another core idea is open communication channels and mutual support among staff members create an inclusive school culture that benefits mainstreamed learners with special education needs.

The findings find resonance in other studies on effective support for mainstreamed learners with SEN that relies on strong collaboration between educators and related service providers. A study by Garcia and Rodriguez (2023) found that schools with regular team meetings and shared planning sessions for SEN students demonstrated significant improvements in student achievement and social-emotional well-being. Collaboration fosters a shared understanding of student needs, allowing educators to develop cohesive and differentiated learning experiences. Smith and Johnson (2018) emphasized the importance of collaboration in promoting inclusive practices, ensuring all staff members feel equipped to support students with SEN.

Family Engagement

The respondents consistently emphasized the importance of family engagement, conveying the following concepts: It is essential for the success of mainstreamed learners with special education needs to involve families significantly in their education. Establishing open and continuous communication between teachers and parents, which includes holding periodic meetings and conducting home visitations, serves to foster collaboration and support. Furthermore, parents should be equipped with resources and guidance on how to support their child's learning at home. This initiative promotes continuity between the school and home environments, ensuring a seamless educational experience for the student.

Family engagement stands as another critical element for success. According to research conducted by Hoover et al. (2019), active involvement of families in their child's education, especially those with SEN, correlates with enhanced academic growth, achievements, and improved social skills among students. Schools can further facilitate and strengthen this engagement by fostering open communication channels, offering resources, and training to families, and collaborating with them on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), as suggested by Turnbull et al. (2020). Robust partnerships between educators and families establish a cohesive support system that significantly contributes to the student's educational objectives and progress.

School Goals

The respondents consistently articulated school goals with the following ideas: Essential goals for mainstreamed learners with special education needs include academic achievement, social inclusion, development of life skills, empowerment for self-advocacy, and smooth transitions to post-secondary education or employment; Schools aim for holistic development, inclusion, empowerment, and readiness for future endeavors for mainstreamed learners with special education needs.

For these strategies to work and be truly effective, schools must establish clear and realistic goals for all students, including those with SEN. Johnson and Smith (2018) argues that well-defined and measurable goals provide direction and focus for educators. It allows them to tailor instruction and support to meet individual student needs. These goals should align with the learner's IEP and be regularly reviewed, evaluated, and adjusted. By

defining clear expectations and tracking progress, schools can ensure that all students, regardless of SEN, are challenged and supported in reaching their potentials.

To sum up, collaboration among staff, strong family engagement, and well-defined school goals emerge as essential themes for ensuring the success of mainstreamed learners with SEN. By fostering a collaborative school environment, actively engaging families, and setting clear goals, teachers can create an inclusive learning experience that is supportive and empowers all students to grow.

Supportive School Practices: Facilitating Success for Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs

Table 10 shows the global theme, organizing themes and basic or general themes for Supportive School Practices: Facilitating Success for Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs. There are four (4) themes that are consistent or generally affirmed by the respondents, namely: Teacher Training and Development; Differentiated Instruction and Resources; Regular Monitoring and Assessment; and Empowerment and Inclusion.

Global Theme

Fostering and Creating a Supportive School Practices for Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs

When considering the needs of diverse learners, the creation of a supportive learning environment emerges as the central theme that intertwines crucial elements such as Teacher Support and Development and Instructional Practices. Research consistently underscores the significance of this supportive environment in facilitating student success (Ainscow, 2016; Mitra, 2023). This thoughtfully cultivated environment serves as the cornerstone for student achievement, empowering every learner to realize their full potential within the context of a diverse classroom setting.

Organizing Themes

In the field of inclusive education, there's a clear connection between the suggested organizing themes—Teacher Support and Development (Mitra, 2023), Instructional Practices, Monitoring and Evaluation, School Culture and Practices (Friend & Cook, 2017)—and the core themes—Teacher Training and Development, Differentiated Instruction and Resources, Regular Monitoring and Assessment, Empowerment, and Inclusion (Ainscow, 2016). This alignment underscores their interdependency, critical for the success of inclusive education. Supporting educators, implementing effective teaching methods, and regularly assessing student progress all contribute to overarching goals of empowerment and inclusion. A positive school culture, incorporating these themes, fosters an environment where all students feel valued and supported (Thousand et al., 2017).

Teacher Support and Development

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of teacher growth and training, especially in the context of education and especially for students with a range of requirements. It becomes apparent that this organizing theme is essential to accomplishing the main objective of fostering a positive learning environment. Studies have repeatedly shown how important it is for instructors to get enough training and assistance in order to help students succeed (Ainscow, 2016; Mitra, 2023). Good teacher preparation goes beyond just imparting knowledge. It gives educators the tools they need to meet the varied requirements and learning preferences of their pupils. This includes instruction in research-proven techniques like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) (Friend & Cook, 2017).

Instructional Practices

Effective instructional practices are an essential part of creating a supportive learning environment. This environment goes beyond content delivery. It promotes and fosters a sense of safety, collaboration, and a focus on student growth (Ainscow, 2016). Effective practices go beyond traditional methods and cater to the diverse needs and learning styles of all students (Friend & Cook, 2017). Research highlights the positive impact of a supportive environment on student outcomes, including academic achievement, social-emotional well-being, and overall motivation (Mitra, 2023).

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation girdle the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data relevant to student learning and the overall school environment. The data may include student progress, classroom climate surveys, and teacher observations (Guskey, 2017). While not directly creating the environment, monitoring and evaluation plays a critical role in creating a supportive learning environment. It guides educators in making informed decisions that ultimately contribute to a more supportive environment (Ainscow,2016).

School Culture and Practices

In a word, practices shape a culture. Shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that permeate every aspect of the school environment (Ainscow, 2016). A supportive school culture emphasizes inclusivity, high expectations, positive relationships, and a focus on student well-being (Mitra,2023).

Basic Themes

Teacher Training and Development

Common and consistent to teacher-respondents is the idea of regular training and professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their understanding of diverse learning needs and effective instructional strategies for learners with special needs. For them it is imperative that there is provision of ongoing support and resources for teachers to effectively cater to the needs of mainstreamed learners with special education needs.

They also expressed consistently the need of fostering open communication among staff members and sharing insights and strategies through regular meetings and conferences. They also highlight the involvement of parents and the broader community in the educational process, seeking their input, collaboration, and support in meeting the needs of mainstreamed learners with special education needs.

A cornerstone of effective PD is targeted training and development programs provided for educators. Research by Brown and White (2017) emphasize the positive impact of PD on teacher morale and competence in working with students with SEN. Programs should prepare educators with knowledge of various SEN presentations, evidence-based instructional strategies, and differentiation techniques. (Peters & Mithaug, 2014) emphasize the need for professional development to be ongoing. It ensures teachers to stay updated with best practices and can adapt their approaches as student needs evolve. This may involve workshops activities that help hone the skills on specific learning difficulties, behavior management techniques, and collaboration strategies.

Differentiated Instruction and Resources

One of the consistently expressed ideas by the key informants is the importance of employing inclusive practices such as differentiated instruction, positive use of technology, and contextualization/indigenization in classrooms. - Providing customized learning materials and resources to meet the diverse needs of mainstreamed learners with special education needs.

An informant articulates by sharing:

Encouraging PD initiatives are essential in arming educators with the knowledge and resources they need to introduce differentiated instruction into the classroom. Ainscow (2016) defines an inclusive classroom as one that encourages and supports all students, regardless of ability levels, to feel like they belong and can participate. According to research by Hall et al. (2017), including Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles into instructional strategies can greatly increase student access and improve learning results. In order to create diverse learning experiences that suit the needs of all students, schools are encouraged to provide continual professional development in areas including curriculum modification, assistive technologies, and creative problem-solving techniques.

Regular Monitoring and Assessment

The informants generally emphasize the use of various methods for progress monitoring, including regular assessment, observations, and checklists. They also highlighted the involvement of teachers, special education coordinators, and parents in ongoing evaluation and adjustment of interventions and support strategies.

Effective PD programs are to be emphasized as it is essential in the ongoing progress monitoring and assessment. Black and William (2018) argue that regular data collection and analysis provides teachers to identify student strengths and weaknesses, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and adjust instruction accordingly. This data can be used to inform IEP development making sure that mainstreamed learners with SEN are making sustained progress towards their academic goals. Professional development programs can equip teachers with various assessment tools and strategies. They help to effectively track student progress and adapt their teaching practices accordingly.

Empower and Inclusion

The educators emphasize the establishing of clear policies that promote inclusive education and ensuring equal access to educational opportunities. They commonly expressed fostering a supportive and inclusive school culture that encourages collaboration and mutual support among all staff members. Generally, the teachers subscribe to empowering mainstreamed learners with special education needs to advocate for themselves and participate actively in decision-making processes (Smith, 2019).

Fostering a culture of empowerment and inclusion is highly essential for teacher preparedness. Empowerment involves providing teachers with the autonomy and resources they need. That empowers them to make decisions in their classrooms. A school-wide focus on inclusion creates a collaborative environment where educators feel supported and confident in their ability to meet the needs of all students. Professional Development programs can incorporate opportunities for collaboration, peer coaching, and mentorship to foster a sense of shared responsibility and build a strong support network for educators working with students with SEN (Ishikawa & Gibbons, 2016).

Effective Collaboration: Enhancing Support Systems for Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs

Collaboration among educators is essential for effectively supporting mainstreamed learners with special education needs in inclusive classrooms. As educational systems strive to create environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students, the role of collaboration becomes increasingly prominent. This introduction sets the stage for exploring the significance of effective collaboration in enhancing support systems for mainstreamed learners with special education needs.

Collaboration among educators has been recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive education practices. Research by Bai and Eichelberger (2019) highlights the importance of collaboration in fostering inclusive environments where the diverse needs of all students, including those with special education needs, are effectively addressed. Effective collaboration involves various stakeholders, including teachers, special education coordinators, support staff, and parents, working together to create supportive learning environments that promote the academic and social success of mainstreamed learners. This review emphasizes the critical role of collaboration in enhancing support systems for mainstreamed learners with special education needs and underscores the need for ongoing research and practice in this area.

Global Theme

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment for Teacher Support and Collaboration

Result shows that within the context of students with diverse needs, creating a supportive learning environment emerges as the global theme that connects the crucial aspects of teacher support and development and collaboration and support. Research invariably highlights the importance of a supportive environment for student success (Ainscow, 2016; Mitra, 2023). Investing in both teacher support and development and collaboration and support is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment (Thousand et al., 2017).

Organizing Themes

Teacher Support and Development

Providing teachers with continual professional development opportunities guarantees they stay up to date on best practices. They have the ability to modify their techniques to fit the changing needs of their pupils

(Thousand et al., 2017). Research repeatedly emphasizes how important it is for teachers to have the support and development they need in order to help students succeed and feel supported in the classroom (Ainscow, 2016; Mitra, 2023).

Collaboration and Support

Teachers can solve problems they may encounter in fostering a supportive atmosphere for all students by pooling their experiences, learning from one another, and sharing strategies through a network of support (Thousand et al., 2017). Continuous assistance cultivates a feeling of professional well-being, enabling educators to be more successful in establishing a welcoming learning environment for all students (Mitra, 2023).

Basic Themes

Result of the study shows the response of the educators to ensuring Effective Collaboration: Enhancing Support Systems for Mainstreamed Learners with Special Education Needs

The global theme is Creating a Supportive Learning Environment. There are two (2) recurring themes that are consistently expressed coming from the lived experience of the teacher respondents, namely: teacher training and development; and collaboration and support.

Teacher Training and Development

They expressed consistently that it is necessary that they be provided with specialized training for teachers in handling mainstreamed learners with special needs. They would appreciate deeply to be offered with continuous professional development opportunities, and that they be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge.

An essential for effective policy intervention is a commitment to high-quality training and development opportunities for educators in the area of SEN. Research by (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017) emphasizes the positive and significant impact of targeted Professional Development on teacher confidence and competence in working with students with SEN. Policy can provide mandate for ongoing training programs that equip and enable educators with in-depth knowledge of diverse SEN manifestations, evidence-based instructional strategies, and differentiation techniques. [Peters & Mithaug, 2014] emphasize the need for these programs to be ongoing and sustained, ensuring teachers to be updated and stay current with best practices and can adapt their approaches as student needs are ever evolving. Policy interventions can motivate by incentivizing participation in specialized training programs. Another possibility is to provide financial support for educators who are keen on pursuing postgraduate studies and qualifications in special education (Friend & Bursuck, 2015).

Effective Collaboration and Support among staff members

The teacher respondents consistently affirmed the need to foster collaboration among teachers, staff, and parents. Along with that is the hope of being provided with avenues for sharing best practices and experiences. Overall, it is essential for them to establish a supportive school culture.

Effective policy can also focus on advocating collaboration and support structures within schools. Schools need to provide and create environments where educators feel empowered and supported in their efforts to meet the needs of all students. Studies by Giangreco & Doyle (2015) argue that strong collaboration between general and special education teachers is critical for inclusive practices. Policy interventions can mandate regular collaboration time for educators, further reinforce SLAC sessions by including co-planning sessions and opportunities for peer coaching and mentorship. Additionally, policies can encourage schools to organize and establish dedicated support teams composed of trained and skilled professionals such as psychologists, speech pathologists, and occupational therapists who can provide ongoing support and guidance to educators working with mainstreamed learners with SEN.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion is convincingly clear: successful mainstreaming of learners hinged on a holistic approach. It's not only about individual teacher preparedness; it's about creating a school environment that proactively supports and develops both teachers and students with special educational needs.

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