



A STUDY ON KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS WITH LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of kindergarten teachers handling learners with Special Education Needs in inclusive classroom settings in Malabog District, specifically focusing on how teachers support learners with Special Education Needs, the instructional strategies and classroom practices they use, and the challenges they encounter in inclusive classrooms. A qualitative case study design was employed involving nine purposively selected kindergarten teachers with direct experience in inclusive education. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers support learners through individualized and developmentally appropriate instruction, safe and nurturing classroom environments, and context-driven teaching practices. Teachers utilized differentiated instruction, structured classroom routines, and peer interaction strategies to address diverse learner needs. However, they also experienced challenges such as limited training in special education, lack of instructional resources, classroom management difficulties, and emotional and workload pressures. Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and commitment in sustaining inclusive practices. Based on the findings, the study recommends strengthening teacher preparation programs, providing continuous professional development in inclusive education, improving instructional resources and support systems, and enhancing collaboration among teachers, school leaders, and parents to further support inclusive kindergarten education.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education, Kindergarten Teachers, Special Education Needs, Instructional Strategies, Classroom Practices,

I. INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its Setting

The Department of Education has implemented policies aimed at promoting inclusive education to ensure that no learner is left behind in the classroom. These policies are designed to provide necessary support to children with special needs who, like all other students, can thrive and succeed when given a supportive environment and sufficient teacher assistance. Although training sessions have been conducted to help teachers implement inclusive practices, challenges remain particularly in kindergarten settings. I have observed difficulties, including classroom management issues and how teachers respond to behavioral challenges such as tantrums. These experiences have prompted me to conduct this study to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by kindergarten teachers.

The problems kindergarten teachers are facing have also been observed in different countries. In Slovenia, preschool teachers and assistants did not feel confident or fully competent to handle the needs of these learners (Mithans et al., 2023). This lack of preparedness points to a gap between inclusive education policies and what teachers actually experience in their classrooms. Moreover, preschool teachers felt that they are less effective in terms of providing the needs of their learners.

In Kuwait, many kindergarten teachers need better training in inclusive practices (Al-Shammari & Hornby, 2019). This lack of training results into ineffective instructional strategies where teachers may not know how to differentiate instruction, increased teacher burnout, and higher risk of exclusion inside the classroom where learners with SEN feel isolated, not actively involved or given passive tasks instead of meaningful participation.

In the Philippines, inclusive education in early childhood settings is supported by national policies such as Republic Act 10157 or the Kindergarten Education Act, which mandates kindergarten as the first formal stage of compulsory education and emphasizes developmentally appropriate, equitable, and child-centered learning experiences for all Filipino children. This is reinforced by DepEd Order No. 12, s. 2023 which strengthens inclusive education frameworks and requires schools to provide necessary interventions and support services for learners with diverse needs, including those with disabilities and developmental delays. Despite these established policies, the actual implementation in many kindergarten classrooms remains inconsistent due to gaps in teacher preparation, lack of aligned training, and variation in resource availability across schools.

In the local context of Davao City, teachers faced persistent obstacles such as limited resources, outdated technology, and the ongoing demand for creativity in lesson delivery. These challenges underscore the urgent need for stronger institutional support, continuous teacher training, and more inclusive policies that respond to the realities of local classrooms (Bañados et al., 2024). When these issues are not addressed, learners with special education needs are at risk of receiving instruction that does not fully meet their developmental and learning requirements. This situation may also widen existing learning gaps and hinder the holistic growth of children during the early foundational years of education.



While inclusive education has become a growing priority in the country, there is still a lot we do not know about how kindergarten teachers actually deal with the everyday challenges of teaching learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Many existing studies tend to focus on SPED teachers or on broad program-level issues, often missing the unique struggles and perspectives of general education kindergarten teachers who are now expected to take on inclusive roles. These teachers are on the frontlines, often without specialized training, figuring things out as they go. What is missing in the current research are stories and insights from their point of view how they manage, what they need, and how they adapt. This study hopes to fill that gap by closely looking into their lived experiences through a cross-case analysis that highlights both their challenges and the creative ways they respond to them.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to discover kindergarten teacher's challenges, coping mechanism, and insights in handling learners with special needs. In particular, the research seeks to respond to the following questions:

1. How do kindergarten teachers teach and support learners with special education needs within their specific classroom and school contexts?
2. What instructional strategies and classroom practices are used by kindergarten teachers to address the diverse needs of learners with special education needs?
3. What challenges do kindergarten teachers encounter in teaching learners with special education needs, and how are these challenges managed?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study can be helpful to the Department of Education officials and school administrators, as the findings provide clear insights into the everyday realities faced by kindergarten teachers handling learners with special needs. The information gathered in this research can serve as a guide in identifying what kind of support these teachers truly need, especially in terms of training, classroom resources, and policy implementation. This study can help shape more responsive programs that support inclusive education at the kindergarten level, ensuring that policies are grounded in actual classroom experiences.

The study is also beneficial for kindergarten teachers themselves. By highlighting their challenges, coping strategies, and reflections, this research allows teachers to better understand their own roles and capacities in inclusive classrooms.

Likewise, parents will benefit from this study. The insights shared by teachers can help parents better understand what happens inside inclusive classrooms and the kind of effort it takes to support children with diverse learning needs.

Lastly, this study will be useful for future researchers. It adds to the growing body of work on inclusive education in early childhood, particularly in the Philippine setting. The data and findings presented here can serve as a valuable reference for those exploring similar themes on teacher experiences, inclusive practices, and early childhood education.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design, particularly phenomenology to explore the real-life experiences of kindergarten teachers handling learners with special needs in inclusive settings. A qualitative study is ideal for gaining a deep understanding of individuals' experiences within their natural contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its environment are not clearly defined (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Each teacher's journey was treated as a unique one, allowing the researcher to listen closely to their personal stories how they face challenges, manage stress, and find meaning in their work. This design values their lived experiences and acknowledges the layered, contextual nature of inclusive teaching.

Participants

This study involved nine (9) kindergarten teachers from Malabog District who are currently teaching in inclusive education settings. These teachers were purposefully selected based on their direct experience handling learners with diverse needs in the early childhood classroom. The decision to involve nine participants is rooted in the principle of qualitative inquiry where depth of understanding is prioritized over breadth. Creswell and Poth (2021) emphasize that in qualitative research, particularly case studies, the number of participants need not be large; what matters more is the richness and relevance of the information each participant can provide.

To ensure the relevance and credibility of the findings, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied in selecting the participants. Only licensed kindergarten teachers currently teaching in inclusive classrooms within the Malabog District were included in the study. These teachers must have at least one year of experience handling learners with special needs, as their prolonged engagement offers deeper reflections on inclusive practices. Teachers who have attended relevant training or seminars on inclusive education will also be prioritized, as they are more likely to provide informed insights about instructional adjustments and challenges.



Sampling Design

This study utilized purposive sampling in selecting the research participants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research where participants are intentionally chosen based on their knowledge, experiences, and relevance to the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2021). In this study, kindergarten teachers who are currently handling learners with Special Education Needs in inclusive classroom settings were deliberately selected because they can provide rich and meaningful insights regarding the realities of inclusive teaching. The participants were chosen based on specific criteria such as being licensed kindergarten teachers, currently assigned in inclusive classrooms, and having at least one year of experience in handling learners with diverse needs. Through purposive sampling, the study ensured that the selected participants possess firsthand experiences that are essential in understanding the challenges, instructional practices, coping mechanisms, and insights related to inclusive education in kindergarten settings.

Data Gathering Procedures

This research went through a process of steps that served as the researcher's guide to the completion of the study.

I sought approval from the Dean of the Graduate School. Upon receiving the Dean's approval, I was then recommended to the Schools Division Superintendent of the Davao City Division to conduct the in-depth interview with kindergarten teachers in the Malabog District for the 2025-2026 academic year. Once the request is granted, I personally coordinated with the school principals and teachers of the participating schools of the study.

Upon the approval of the said survey and interview protocol, I set an indicated time to conduct the interview. One-on-one interviews are appropriate for sensitive topics or topics needing in-depth exploration. I often utilized data-gathering techniques in qualitative research because it enable the direct collection of highly customized information from the source who are the kindergarten teachers (Brannan et al., 2022).

Before proceeding to the interviews, I prepared consent and sought permission from the participants about their responses being recorded or written down. During the interview, with the help of semi-structured guide interview questions, I asked leading or probing questions. There was no time limit on the interview. After the interview, I transcribed all the responses from the recordings, and following that, the transcripts were subjected to analysis and interpretation. Once the specific objectives were met after thorough scrutiny, I proceeded to the results and discussions in fulfillment of this paper.

To ensure the reliability of the data, I adhered to consistent and rigorous procedures throughout the data collection and analysis phases. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the standardization of key questions while also enabling flexibility to explore emerging themes. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review their transcribed responses for accuracy, ensuring that their views are correctly interpreted.

Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was used as the primary strategy for analyzing qualitative data. As a flexible yet structured approach, it allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes that emerge from the participants' shared experiences, particularly regarding the challenges, coping strategies, and insights of kindergarten teachers working with learners with special needs (Anas et al., 2023). This method helped uncover the deeper narratives behind their day-to-day classroom realities, highlighting how they make sense of inclusive teaching in varied contexts. The process not only focus on the words spoken during interviews but also on how teachers express their feelings, values, and reflections about their roles.

In analyzing the qualitative data, the study also utilized Creswell and Poth's (2021) data analysis model for qualitative research. This model guided the researcher through a systematic process of organizing, preparing, coding, and interpreting the data gathered from the interviews. Following Creswell's approach, the researcher first organized and transcribed the interview recordings before immersing in the data through repeated reading of the transcripts. Significant statements and meaningful segments were then coded and grouped into categories, which later evolved into broader themes that reflected the common experiences and perspectives of the participants. The use of Creswell's model provided a clear and structured framework for managing large amounts of qualitative data while ensuring that the interpretation remained grounded in the actual voices and lived experiences of the kindergarten teachers.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching and Supporting Learners with Special Education Needs

Teaching and supporting learners with Special Education Needs (SEN) emerged as a multifaceted process that requires kindergarten teachers to balance learner diversity with the realities of their classroom contexts. The findings revealed that teachers view inclusive education not merely as the implementation of prescribed instructional strategies but as a continuous process of adapting teaching practices to meet the unique developmental, academic, and emotional needs of learners. Three interrelated dimensions characterized this process: individualized and developmentally appropriate learner support, the creation of a safe and inclusive classroom climate, and context-driven teaching shaped by available resources and institutional conditions.



Teachers emphasized the importance of individualized and developmentally appropriate support as a central component of inclusive practice. Participants described modifying instructional pacing, simplifying tasks, providing step-by-step assistance, and focusing on individual progress rather than uniform performance standards. They also highlighted the value of emotional encouragement and positive reinforcement in building learners' confidence and willingness to participate in classroom activities. These practices reflect a learner-centered approach that recognizes diverse developmental trajectories and promotes meaningful participation among learners with SEN.

Another significant finding was the importance of creating a safe, nurturing, and inclusive classroom environment. Teachers viewed emotional safety as a prerequisite for learning and emphasized patience, acceptance, and supportive teacher-learner relationships as essential elements of inclusion. Participants reported intentionally fostering peer acceptance, establishing predictable routines, and maintaining a caring classroom atmosphere to reduce anxiety and encourage active participation. Such practices enabled learners with SEN to feel valued, respected, and confident in engaging with learning experiences alongside their peers.

The findings further revealed that inclusive teaching is strongly influenced by contextual factors within the school environment. Teachers described challenges related to limited instructional materials, large class sizes, insufficient support personnel, and unclear implementation guidelines. Despite these constraints, participants demonstrated flexibility and resourcefulness by adapting lessons, improvising materials, and modifying strategies to accommodate learners' needs. Their experiences illustrate how inclusive practices are often shaped by the availability of resources, administrative support, and opportunities for professional development.

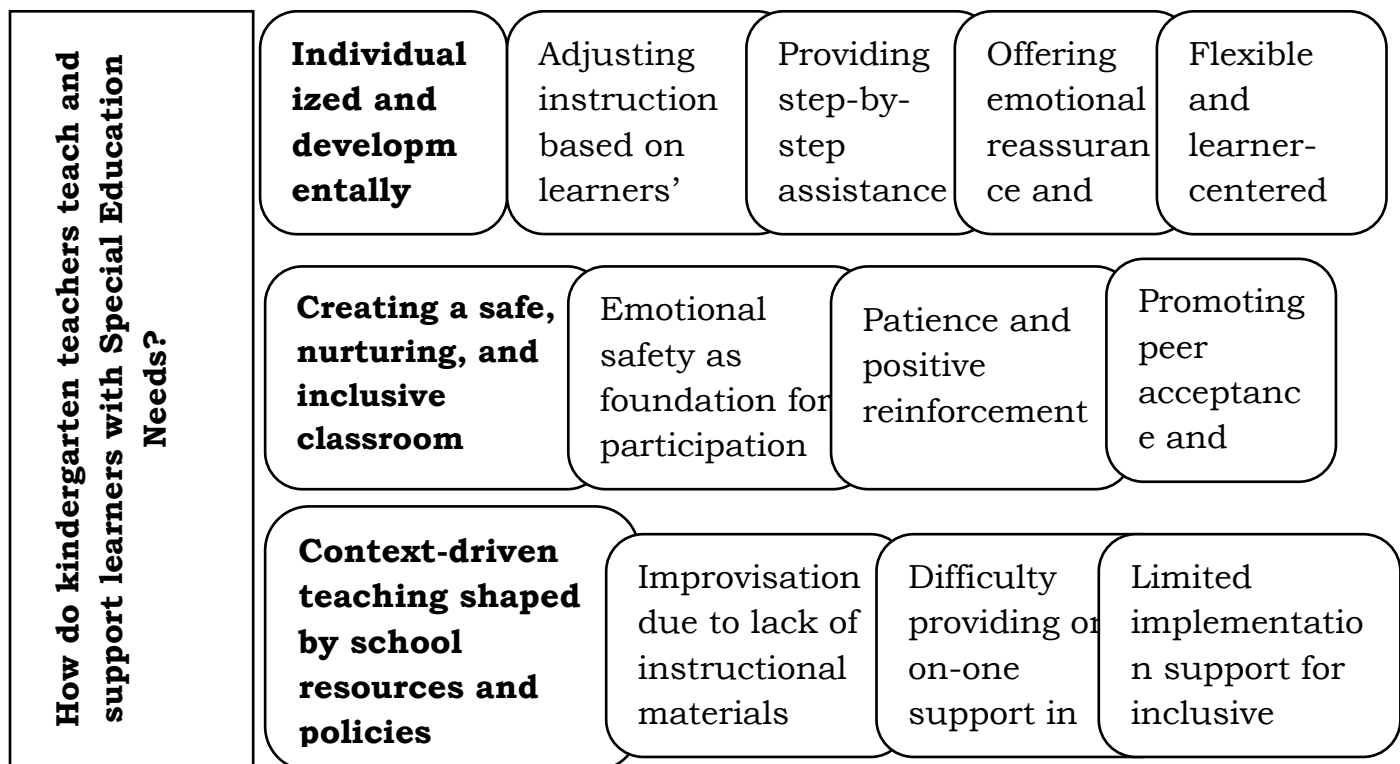


Figure 1. Overview of how do kindergarten teachers teach and support learners with Special Education Needs.

Instructional Strategies and Classroom Practices are Used by Kindergarten Teachers to Address the Diverse Needs of Learners

Instructional strategies and classroom practices used by kindergarten teachers to address the diverse needs of learners with Special Education Needs were characterized by flexibility, structure, and guided participation. The findings revealed that teachers employed differentiated instruction, routine-based classroom management, and peer-supported learning to promote meaningful inclusion. These practices show that inclusive kindergarten teaching requires more than simply placing learners with Special Education Needs in regular classrooms; it involves purposeful adjustments that allow all learners to participate according to their abilities, readiness, and developmental needs.

Differentiated instruction emerged as a key strategy in responding to learner diversity. Teachers adjusted activities, simplified tasks, modified expected outputs, and used hands-on and visual materials such as pictures, blocks, games, and improvised resources.



These adjustments enabled learners with Special Education Needs to engage in the same classroom activities at levels appropriate to their capacities. Rather than excluding learners from common tasks, teachers created flexible versions of activities to support participation, confidence, and gradual learning progress.

Routine-based and structured classroom practices were also essential in supporting learners with Special Education Needs. Teachers emphasized the importance of consistent routines, structured transitions, repeated instructions, step-by-step guidance, and visual cues to help learners understand expectations and reduce anxiety. These practices provided predictability and emotional security, allowing learners to become calmer, more focused, and more independent in accomplishing classroom tasks. In this sense, structure functioned as a supportive framework that helped learners navigate the classroom environment more successfully.

Inclusive participation through peer interaction and guided support further strengthened classroom inclusion. Teachers intentionally paired learners with classmates, used peers as models for learning and behavior, and facilitated group activities to reduce isolation and promote belongingness. However, participants also emphasized that peer interaction must be guided by the teacher to ensure that learners with Special Education Needs are not left behind. Overall, the findings suggest that effective inclusive classroom practice depends on teachers' ability to combine differentiated instruction, structured routines, and guided peer engagement to create responsive and supportive learning environments.

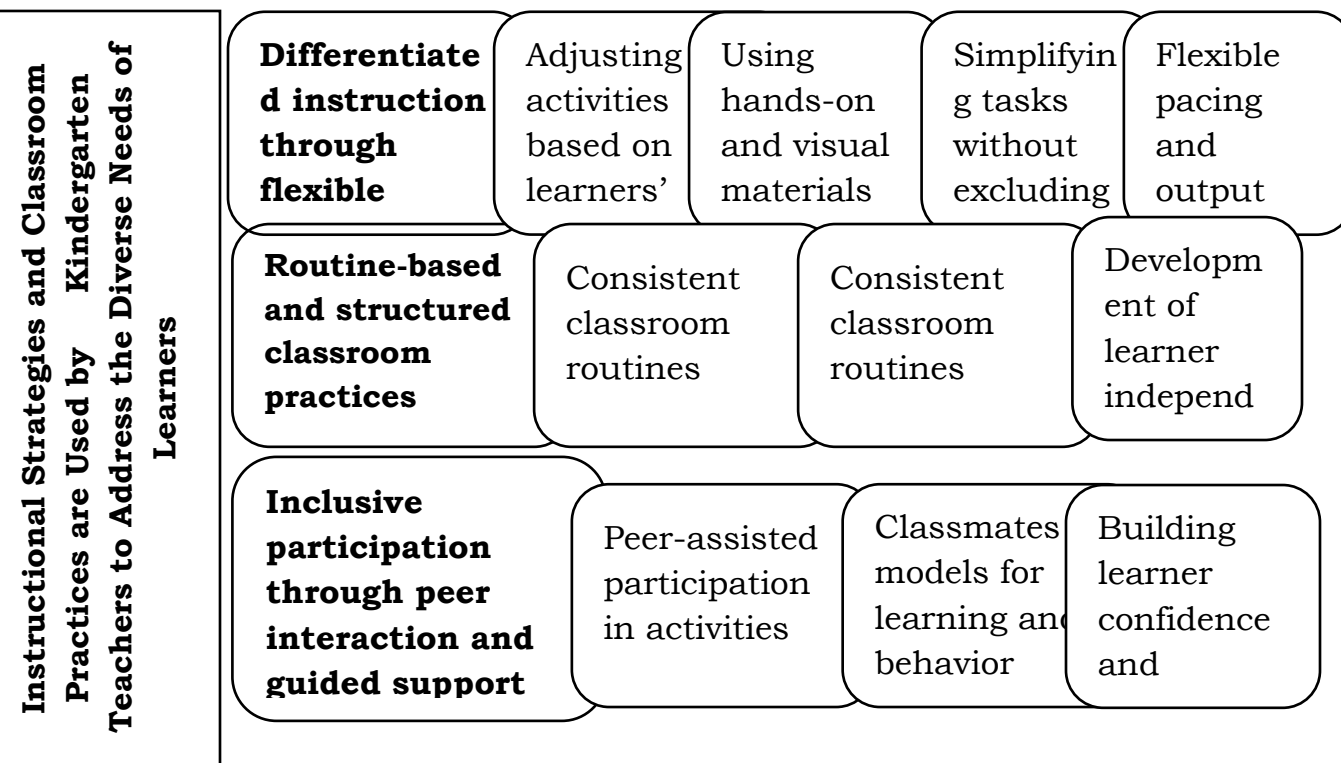


Figure 2. Instructional Strategies and Classroom Practices are Used by Kindergarten Teachers to Address the Diverse Needs of Learners

Challenges of Kindergarten Teachers in Teaching Learners with Special Education Needs

Kindergarten teachers in inclusive classrooms encounter multiple challenges in supporting learners with Special Education Needs (SEN), extending beyond instructional concerns to include professional, institutional, and emotional demands. The findings revealed that teachers face difficulties related to limited preparation in special education, inadequate resources, classroom management complexities, and increasing workload responsibilities. These challenges influence teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices effectively and highlight the need for stronger support systems within schools.

A major challenge identified was the lack of adequate training and professional preparation for inclusive education. Participants reported that their preservice education provided minimal exposure to special education, while available in-service training was often general and insufficient to address the specific needs of learners with SEN. As a result, many teachers relied on self-directed learning, personal experiences, and informal professional networks to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for inclusive teaching. Although



teachers demonstrated initiative and commitment, the findings suggest that more specialized and sustained professional development is needed to strengthen their confidence and competence in handling diverse learner needs.

Resource limitations and classroom management demands also emerged as significant barriers. Teachers described difficulties arising from limited instructional materials, large class sizes, inadequate classroom space, and the absence of teacher aides or SPED specialists. These conditions restricted opportunities for individualized support and increased the complexity of managing learner behaviors while simultaneously attending to the needs of the entire class. Despite these constraints, teachers adapted through prioritization, classroom routines, peer support strategies, and creative use of available resources, demonstrating flexibility in responding to challenging classroom realities.

The findings further revealed the emotional and workload pressures associated with inclusive teaching. Participants reported experiencing stress, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of being overwhelmed due to the combined demands of lesson adaptation, learner support, administrative tasks, and documentation requirements. Nevertheless, teachers remained committed to inclusion by drawing motivation from learners' progress and seeking support through collaboration with colleagues, school leaders, and parents. Overall, the study highlights that while resilience and professional dedication enable teachers to sustain inclusive practices, effective implementation of inclusive education requires systemic support through targeted training, adequate resources, and collaborative school-based support mechanisms.

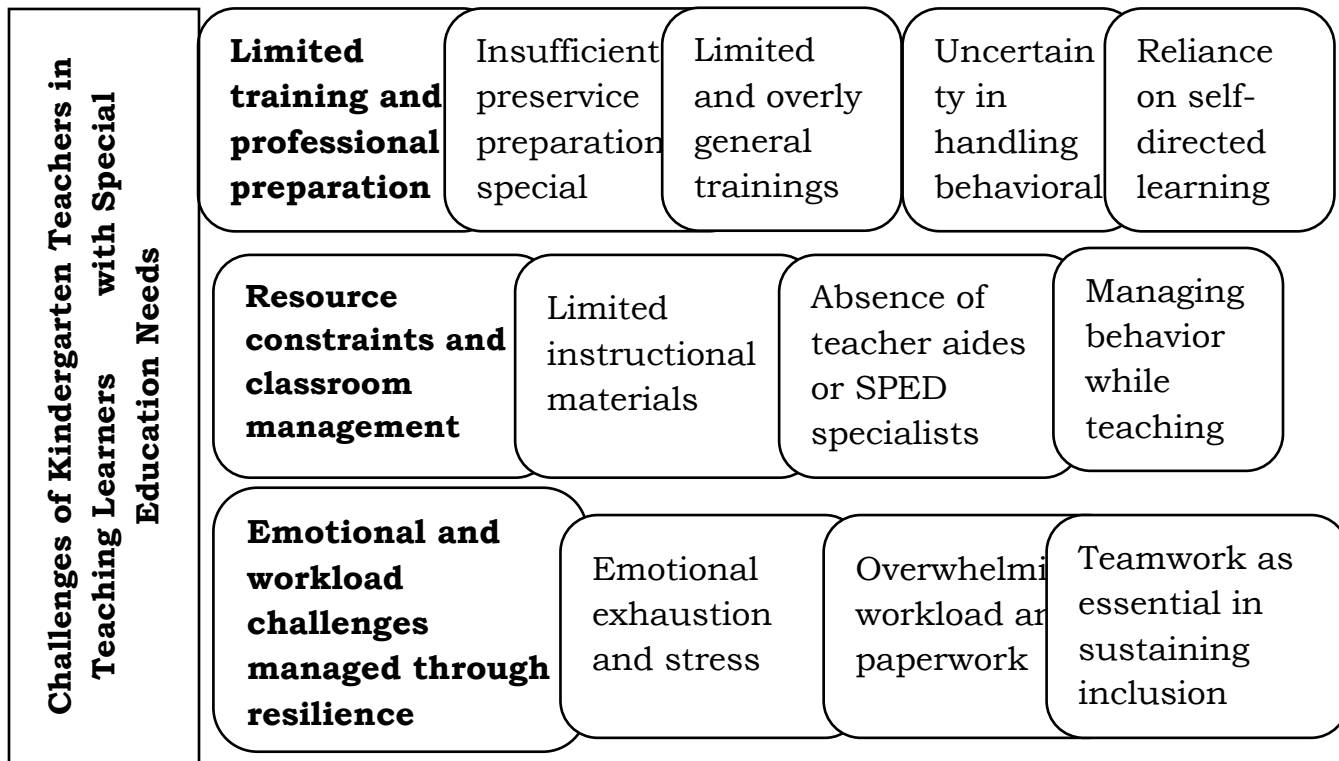


Figure 3. Challenges of Kindergarten Teachers in Teaching Learners with Special Education Need.

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications

The findings of this study yield several important implications for inclusive kindergarten education, particularly in supporting teachers who handle learners with Special Education Needs in regular classroom settings.

The results highlight the central role of teachers' beliefs, confidence, and sense of responsibility in sustaining inclusive practices. Kindergarten teachers consistently demonstrated commitment to learner well-being and inclusion despite limited training and resources. This suggests that inclusive education initiatives must prioritize strengthening teachers' self-efficacy, as teachers who believe in their capacity to support diverse learners are more likely to persist, adapt strategies, and remain engaged in inclusive teaching.

This implication strongly aligns with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), which emphasizes self-efficacy as a key driver of behavior and perseverance. The findings indicate that teachers who gradually developed confidence often through experience, reflection, and small learner successes were more willing to experiment with differentiated instruction, structured routines, and peer-



supported activities. Strengthening teacher self-efficacy through targeted professional development and mentoring may therefore enhance inclusive practices and reduce teacher burnout in kindergarten settings.

Second, the study underscores the importance of understanding inclusive teaching as a context-dependent practice shaped by multiple environmental systems. Teachers' instructional decisions, coping strategies, and emotional resilience were deeply influenced by school-level resources, administrative support, collaboration with colleagues and parents, and broader policy conditions. These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which explains how individuals operate within interconnected systems. In this study, the microsystem (classroom dynamics), mesosystem (school leadership and parent collaboration), and exosystem (availability of training and support services) collectively shaped teachers' inclusive experiences. This implies that improving inclusion cannot rely solely on teacher effort; it requires coordinated support across institutional levels.

Third, the findings reinforce the relevance of Inclusive Pedagogy Theory as articulated by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). Teachers did not view inclusion as merely providing special accommodations for a few learners; instead, many adopted flexible, child-centered practices that benefited the entire class. Strategies such as differentiated activities, routine-based instruction, and peer interaction reflect an inclusive pedagogical stance that anticipates learner diversity rather than reacting to difficulties after they arise. This suggests that professional development programs should shift from deficit-oriented models toward inclusive pedagogy that emphasizes universal design, flexibility, and shared participation in kindergarten classrooms.

Finally, the study highlights the role of teachers' intentions, attitudes, and perceived control in shaping inclusive practices, consistent with Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991). While teachers generally held positive attitudes toward inclusion, their ability to enact inclusive strategies varied depending on access to resources, training, and institutional support. Teachers who perceived greater control through supportive leadership, collaboration, or available materials were more confident and proactive in implementing inclusive practices. This implies that strengthening both internal motivation and external support systems is essential for translating inclusive beliefs into sustained classroom practice.

The study suggests that effective inclusive kindergarten education depends on the dynamic interaction of teacher beliefs, contextual conditions, instructional practices, challenges, and support systems. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, Inclusive Pedagogy, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the findings emphasize that inclusion is not a uniform or idealized process but a negotiated practice shaped by real classroom realities. Addressing gaps in training, ensuring equitable access to resources, and strengthening institutional support can empower kindergarten teachers to sustain inclusive practices and better support learners with Special Education Needs.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study offered the following recommendations:

1. Teachers are encouraged to participate in sustained and expanded professional development opportunities focusing on practical and context-responsive strategies for inclusive education. Training programs may emphasize differentiated instruction, classroom management, and flexible child-centered approaches for learners with Special Education Needs. Collaborative initiatives such as learning action cells, peer mentoring, and professional learning communities may also be strengthened to encourage the sharing of best practices, innovation, and reflective teaching.
2. Parents and families are encouraged to become active partners in inclusive education. Schools may implement parent orientation programs, regular communication mechanisms, and guided involvement activities to help families better understand and support the needs of learners with Special Education Needs. Strengthening home-school partnerships may contribute to learners' social, emotional, and academic development.
3. School administrators and policymakers are encouraged to address systemic gaps affecting the implementation of inclusive education in kindergarten settings. This may include improving access to instructional materials, increasing support personnel, providing regular needs-based teacher training, and establishing clearer guidelines and stronger institutional support mechanisms. Regular monitoring and evaluation may also be conducted to support effective policy implementation.
4. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the long-term effects of inclusive kindergarten practices on learners' academic performance, social development, and well-being. Further studies may also examine the perspectives of parents, school administrators, and support staff, as well as conduct comparative studies across districts or educational levels to strengthen understanding of inclusive education practices.

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