

Lived Experiences of Foreign Teachers in Teaching Learners with Special Needs in Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT: This phenomenology study explored the lived experiences of special education (SPED) teachers in Thai-Singapore International School when dealing with learners with special education needs. Purposive sampling was used to identify the 10 special education teachers who agreed to take part in the study as participants. Teacher experiences were identified using semi structured interview questionnaire. The data were analyzed using thematic approach. Seven distinct themes emerged from the analyses of the key informants' collective descriptions of their experiences as SPED teachers: accomplishments in teaching career, factors contributing to their success, approaches to managing diverse learning needs, challenges encountered, strategies for coping with challenges, available support systems, and influences on teaching practices. The study concluded that most teachers who assisted students with learning needs experienced time constraints, resource limitations and managing diverse paces. Thus, they needed proper differentiated instruction and planning, and collaboration and support from stakeholders. The study also came up with strategic action plan for inclusive education to strengthen teacher support and enhance learner success through professional development and collaborative strategies.

KEYWORDS: special needs, inclusive education, differentiated instruction, time constraints, Thai-Singapore International School

I. INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of inclusive education addressed the concept of offering opportunities for handicapped learners or learners with special needs to learn alongside other learners in normal schools on an equal basis. The premise was that if handicapped people received adequate help, they succeeded in school.

According to UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2009, as cited in Traya and Lopez, 2023), every child, regardless of abilities or disabilities, had the right to access education in a regular school environment. It advocated for inclusive education, promoting equal opportunities for all learners, including those with special education needs. This approach promoted diversity and respects the rights and dignity of all earners, ensuring a quality education in a respectful setting.

It further stated that inclusive education was a teaching approach that ensured all learners received a high-quality and equitable education regardless of their abilities or special needs. It integrated learners with special needs into mainstream classrooms, promoting diversity and reducing stigma. Inclusive education promoted a supportive environment where all earners were valued and respected. Teachers were trained to differentiate instruction and provide resources to meet diverse needs. The goal was to create a more just society where all earners could thrive academically and socially.

As stated by Kantavong Narot (n.d.), the 1999 National Education Act established nine categories of special needs: visually impaired, hearing impaired, intellectually limited, physically limited, learning disabilities, speech impaired, behavioral or emotional disorders, autistic, and multiple handicapped learners. The 1999 National Educational Act legislated the national system to become inclusive, which meant that schools must recruit all learners without prejudice. As a result, schools must make significant changes to accommodate learners with a variety of requirements.

As stated by Singh (2022), the Ministry of Education in Thailand was responsible for providing education for learners with disabilities, as defined by the 2008 Education Act for Persons with Disabilities. The 2017-2036 National Education Plan aimed to include earners at socio-economic disadvantages, with a focus on earners with special education needs. Thailand had strong governance bodies, such as the National Committee for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and the Elimination of Unfair Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities, which demonstrated a commitment to inclusive education. However, Thailand was still transitioning to fully including earners with disabilities in education due to low staff training and lack of facilities. Inadequate teacher education was a key factor in not achieving inclusive education standards. Assessment practices were inflexible and unresponsive to diverse learning needs, and Thailand planned to review its assessment system to become more inclusive.

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Initiatives like 43 special schools and 76 provincial special education centers encouraged formal education for learners with disabilities. Data on all learners, including those with disabilities, was collected through the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education.

It also shared Singapore's Enabling Masterplan 2017-2021 which aimed to become more inclusive, including in education. However, the country did not have a formal definition of inclusive education, as it recognized that inclusion went beyond the education system. Learners with special education needs were defined as those with disabilities, learning difficulties, social, academic, physical, or sensory needs, or requiring different support than their peers. Education for learners with disabilities depended on the type and severity of disability. Learners with cognitive abilities and adaptive skills could learn in mainstream schools, while those with moderate-profound visual impairment and hearing loss received resources and support from trained teachers in seven mainstream schools. Over 80% of learners with special education needs learned in inclusive classroom settings. The Ministry of Education oversaw teacher training, and the Disability Office provided thought leadership and advice on policy issues. Special education teachers received pre-service training from the National Institute of Education and ongoing professional development through customized in-service courses.

However, implementing inclusive education in international schools presented unique challenges, especially for foreign teachers who might lack specific training in special education or experience in navigating the cultural and educational dynamics of a host country. The Thai-Singapore International School (TSIS), which combined international standards with local cultural contexts, offered a distinctive environment where these challenges came to the forefront.

Regular teachers' perceptions of teaching learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms had been established in several research.

According to Moberg et al. (2020), the Finnish teachers were concerned about how well they were able to implement inclusion, especially when working with learners who had emotional and behavioral problems or intellectual challenges. However, the Japanese teachers had a higher positive opinion of inclusive education's benefits for learners with or without special needs. They added that since Finnish schools placed a strong emphasis on the efficacy of inclusive education, the Finnish teachers in this study were less convinced than the Japanese teachers that the efficacy discourse supported the need for inclusive education. The findings supported the idea that further investigation was required to explore how enhancements in traditional education were implemented in diverse cultural and historical settings, with the aim of broadening the overall comprehension of inclusive education.

Furthermore, there were still issues, namely a shortage of qualified special education teachers with the implementation of inclusive education. Most teachers in special education programs were temporary workers. Schools that provided inclusive classrooms encountered a variety of challenges, including skilled personnel, facilities, and funding.

According to Tcheimegni (2018, as cited in Traya and Lopez, 2023), the commitment to provide quality primary education to all learners, adolescents, and adults had faced various challenges due to a lack of appropriate legislation, material support, educator attitudes, and professional training in France, Germany, and the Netherlands. He further stated that to analyze the condition and effectiveness of inclusive education among learners with special educational needs in diverse contexts, attention was mostly focused on instructors' attitudes, with little study conducted on instructional self-efficacy.

According to Lim and Quah (2004, as cited in Kantavong Narot (n.d.)), many teachers had noted the difficulty of integration and inclusion of learners with disabilities in inclusive schools. Teachers often lacked information and skills on how to manage an inclusive classroom.

Foreign teachers at TSIS often taught diverse student populations, including learners with SEN, without adequate preparation in special education strategies. This situation could create a gap between the ideal of inclusive education and the reality of classroom practice, particularly for teachers who were expected to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of SEN learners while maintaining rigorous academic standards for all learners. Moreover, foreign teachers might also face language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with local educational policies, further complicating their ability to effectively manage inclusive classrooms with SEN learners.

Therefore, this research aimed to address these gaps by focusing on the lived experiences of foreign teachers in teaching learners with special education needs at the Thai-Singapore International School that shed light on the real-world struggles and successes of teachers handling learners with special needs while also offering evidence-based suggestions that supported their success in regular classroom settings.

By understanding their lived experiences, this research aimed to contribute to the broader understanding of inclusive education, especially in international schools, and highlight areas where further support and professional development were needed for teachers.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the lived experiences of foreign teachers involved in teaching learners with special needs in inclusive education?
2. What are the insights gained from the teachers' responses?

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3. What are the themes that can be derived from the teachers' responses that reflect the broader issues or patterns related to teaching learners with special needs in inclusive education?

III. RESEARCH METHOD

The study used a phenomenological thematic analysis method, searching into the visible components of the phenomenon and obtaining new insights and a deeper understanding. Selecting co-participants for this study aligned with the goals of the research and proper representation of a diverse yet relevant group. A semi-structured interview questionnaire guideline was developed which was validated and employed as the primary data-gathering tool. This was used for one-on-one interviews. Researcher chose ten co-participants for the study. Total enumeration purposive sampling was utilized to carefully choose participants who gave unique insights into the lived experiences of teachers involved in inclusive education of learners with special needs. The sample technique promoted experience richness and depth, aiming for a balanced representation of both seasoned educators and those new to inclusive practices. The participant selection process incorporated ethical issues such as confidentiality and continuing withdrawal options. This selection also included formal qualifications, workshops, or professional development courses related to inclusive education practices. The development and interpretation of codes/themes was done to provide a simple or straightforward explanation of the participants' experiences, which was necessary for understanding the participants' perspectives.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses gathered from teachers working with learners with special needs illuminate a variety of themes that reflect broader issues and patterns in the field of inclusive education. These themes not only capture the individual experiences and strategies employed by teachers but also highlight significant trends and challenges within the educational landscape. As the demand for inclusive practices continues to grow, understanding these themes becomes essential for fostering environments where all learners can thrive.

Theme	Subtheme	Evidence
Accomplishments in teaching career	Student Growth and Transformation	“One of the accomplishments I am most proud of in my teaching career is helping students who struggle academically or socially to find confidence and succeed.” (Participant 1) “Watching shy students and those with unique challenges gradually become more confident, learn new skills, grasp concepts, and gain independence inspires me every day.” (Participant 4) “and learn science in a creative and collaborative setting.” (Participant 2)
	Innovative Teaching Practices	“.... inspiring my students to love for learning that extends beyond the classroom.” (Participant 7) “I’m proud of the relationships I’ve built with my students and their families.” (Participant 3) “Another accomplishment would be creating strong relationships with parents, working together to support each child’s unique journey.” (Participant 5)
	Community and Relationship Building	“I’m most proud of is creating a positive and inclusive classroom environment where all students, including those with special needs, feel valued and supported.” (Participant 4) “I’d be most proud of fostering a classroom environment where each child feels safe, valued, and excited to learn.” (Participant 5)
	Inclusive and Supportive Environment	“.... being able to mentor colleagues that will allow me to extend help and collaborate for the benefit of students learning.” (Participant 7) “Proud of my lifelong learning... proud of my ongoing professional development efforts, as I strive to continuously improve my teaching practice and stay current with educational best practices” (Participant 3) “I put great dedication in continuously refining my teaching expertise by attaining advanced qualifications, certifications, and specialized training
	Lifelong Learning and Professional Development	

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		in fields special education, language acquisition, or technology integration.” (Participant 9)
Factor contributing to success	Building Relationships Strong Holistic and Empathetic Teaching Adaptability and Flexibility Collaborative Approach Passion and Enthusiasm	“The biggest factor contributing to my success has been my dedication to building strong relationship with my students.” (Participant 1) “My unwavering dedication to building meaningful connections with my students is the main thing that makes me a good teacher.” (Participant 2) “I encourage open communication and create a space where students feel safe to express themselves and take risks in their learning.” (Participant 3) “Additionally, continuous learning and adapting new teaching methods to keep my approach fresh and effective would play a significant role.” (Participant 5) “The biggest factor contributing to my success as a teacher has been my ability to remain adaptable and responsive to the needs of my students.” (Participant 9) “By investing time in getting to know each student as an individual, I can tailor my teaching strategies to better meet their needs and help them succeed.” (Participant 10) “Understanding their individual needs and creating a supportive environment has helped them feel confident and motivated to learn.” (Participant 4) “Collaboration with parents, making them partners in their child's education, would also be crucial.” (Participant 5) “The biggest factor contributing to my success as a teacher is my passion for teaching.” (Participant 7) “My passion drives my enthusiasm, commitment, and continual improvement, which fosters a love for learning in both me and my students.” (Participant 8)
Approaches to Managing Diverse Learning Needs	Differentiated Instruction Inclusive Environment Personalized Support Scaffolding Techniques	“I used differentiated instruction which involves adopting lessons to various learning styles and levels such as using visual aids, hands-on activities, and breaking tasks into smaller steps.” (Participant 1) “I use differentiated instruction to manage diverse learning needs. I tailor my lessons to accommodate students' varying abilities and learning styles.” (Participant 8) “However, ongoing assessment, patience and creating an inclusive classroom could address these challenges.” (Participant 1) “We foster a supportive environment by helping kids respect each other's individuality.” (Participant 2) “I spend one-on-one time with pupils who need it or use specific tools to assist them learn.” (Participant 2) “This includes using visuals, hands-on activities, group work, and one-on-one support when needed.” (Participant 6) “I also incorporate scaffolding techniques to help all students grasp complex concepts while promoting independence.” (Participant 3) “I make sure each child feels included and can learn at their own pace”. (Participant 6)
Challenges Encountered	Time Constraints	“Time constraints also make it difficult to give each child individual attention.” (Participant 4) “Differentiated instruction in classrooms can be challenging due to time constraints, classroom management, limited resources, varying levels of student engagement, professional development needs,

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	Resource Limitations Managing Diverse Paces Classroom Dynamics	lack of support from colleagues or administration, balancing individualized support, and varied assessments.” (Participant 8) “My obstacles include finding time to help everyone and limited resources.” (Participant 2) “However, differentiated instruction in classrooms can be challenging due to time constraints, classroom management, limited resources, varying levels of student engagement, professional development needs, lack of support from colleagues or administration, balancing individualized support, and varied assessments.” (Participant 8) “I do encounter challenges, such as balancing the varying pace of learning and ensuring that every student is engaged and challenged appropriately.” (Participant 3) “Students with diverse backgrounds and experiences may struggle with respect and understanding, while behavioral issues may be amplified when there are a mix of students with special needs and typically developing students.” (Participant 9) “Managing classroom dynamics and maintaining an inclusive environment where all students feel valued, without any feeling neglected or overwhelmed, requires constant effort and coordination with specialists and parents.” (Participant 5) “I struggle with planning and organization, maintaining classroom order, and ensuring all students remain engaged.” (Participant 8)
Strategies for Coping with Challenges	Differentiated Instruction and Planning Collaboration and Support Personal Well-Being and Self-Care Continuous Improvement and Feedback	“I cope with these challenges by staying organized, planning lessons that can adapt to different needs, and prioritizing patience and flexibility.” (Participant 6) “To cope with the challenges of implementing differentiated instruction, I focused on streamlining my planning and organization.” (Participant 8) “Importantly, I sought support from colleagues and our guidance counselor, creating a network where we could share resources and advice.” (Participant 5) “I also collaborate with other teachers and families to find the best ways to support each student.” (Participant 6) “I put my own health and happiness first by doing things that help me recharge, like setting limits, taking breaks when I can, and doing things like spending time with my family or doing artistic hobbies.” (Participant 2) “Taking breaks to recharge and celebrating small victories helps me stay motivated and focused.” (Participant 6) “I regularly assess student progress and adjust my strategies as needed, always seeking feedback from both students and colleagues to improve my practice.” (Participant 3) “I make use of brief check-ins or send concise progress reports to ensure everyone stays updated on student needs and progress.” (Participant 10)
Available Support Systems	Professional Support	“Our school have specialized staff, such as special education teachers and counselor, who can provide guidance and strategies” (Participant 3) “Our school has dedicated special education staff, such as therapists, counselors, or resource teachers, who work closely with classroom teachers to support students with special needs.” (Participant 8)

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	Collaborative Networks	“We collaborate with other teachers, especially those experienced in special education, who can provide valuable insights and shared strategies for managing inclusive classrooms.” (Participant 3)
	Professional Development	“Regular collaboration with other teachers has also been very helpful.” (Participant 4)
	Community Connections	“Professional growth and training once a year.” (Participant 2) “I have support from the school’s guidance counselor and receive training every term on handling different learners.” (Participant 4) “We build relationships with parents or guardians to help teachers understand the individual needs of the learners and create more tailored support strategies.” (Participant 3) “Regular communication with parents and community organizations provides insight into students' backgrounds and needs.” (Participant 7)
Influences on Teaching Practices	Adaptability and Flexibility	“I’ve learned to adapt my lessons to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs, ensuring that every student can engage with the material in a way that suits them best.” (Participant 3)
	Patience and Empathy	“It has made me more flexible and creative, encouraging me to try different ways to help all my students learn.” (Participant 6) “This experience has also deepened my empathy and understanding, making me a more responsive and adaptable educator overall.” (Participant 7)
	Commitment to Inclusivity	“This experience has taught me the importance of patience, empathy, and building strong relationships with students to foster trust and encourage participation.” (Participant 8) “This experience has deepened my understanding of the unique needs of each student and strengthen my commitment to fostering an inclusive classroom where everyone can thrive.” (Participant 1)
	Collaboration and Support	“I seek out training and resources on special education techniques, which has positively influenced my professional growth and deepened my commitment to inclusive practices.” (Participant 10) “This includes fostering peer collaboration and encouraging empathy among students.” (Participant 3) “It’s also deepened my collaboration with colleagues and parents, ensuring a holistic support system.” (Participant 5)

The study identifies several important themes pertinent to the implementation of inclusive education and the methods teachers employ to accommodate various needs of their learners.

Differentiated Instruction

The participants' responses collectively emphasize the central role of Differentiated Instruction in addressing the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms. They highlight various strategies such as tailoring lessons to individual learning styles, collaborating with special education professionals and parents, and maintaining flexible planning. Participants stress the importance of organization, time management, and the use of flexible groupings to support student learning effectively. Additionally, they underscore the need for continuous professional development to adapt to evolving student needs, ensuring inclusive and responsive teaching practices.

Per Kelley (2017, as cited in Stingo, 2024), to offer differentiated and tailored instruction in classrooms, special education teachers require assistance. Prior experiences with these teaching techniques have demonstrated that teachers require assistance in creating and designing lesson plans, programs, and activities to meet every student's needs. Similarly,

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Velazquez (2022) pointed out that teachers who effectively apply learning theories to create differentiated and individualized instruction can serve as valuable resources for colleagues who may struggle with these practices. By drawing on theories such as constructivism, multiple intelligences, or Bloom's Taxonomy, these experienced teachers design tailored lessons that address diverse student needs, learning styles, and abilities. Sharing their strategies, insights, and practical techniques can help other educators understand how to adapt lessons more effectively, ultimately enhancing the overall learning environment and student engagement in the school community

Inclusive and Supportive Environment

The theme of an Inclusive Environment is prominently reflected in the participants' responses, showcasing strategies aimed at ensuring all students feel respected, supported, and valued. Key approaches include ongoing assessment and patience (Participant 1) to adapt instruction and support student growth and fostering respect for individuality (Participant 2) to promote acceptance and reduce exclusion. Collaboration and peer support (Participant 3) are also highlighted as vital for building a sense of classroom community. Additionally, the use of varied teaching methods (Participant 5) addresses diverse learning styles, making lessons more accessible and inclusive for all learners.

As found by Kefallinou et al. (2020), inclusive education promoted effective classroom practices that benefited all students by fostering interactive and engaging learning methods. Techniques like cooperative and dialogic learning, peer tutoring, and collaborative problem-solving encouraged students to work together, share ideas, and support each other's learning. These interactions built a sense of community, improved social skills, and allowed students to learn from diverse perspectives. They also catered to varied learning needs by promoting active participation, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities, making the classroom a more dynamic and supportive environment for everyone. Similarly, Brown and Johnson (2021) stated that special education focused on offering individualized support to students who had disabilities, exceptionalities, or unique learning needs. These students often needed tailored resources, accommodations, or modifications to fully access and benefit from the curriculum. This support could involve specialized teaching methods, adapted materials, and sometimes the integration of assistive technology to help students participate actively in classroom activities. By providing targeted assistance, special education aimed to help each student reach their fullest potential academically, socially, and emotionally, creating opportunities for them to succeed within and beyond the classroom

Time Constraints

The theme of Time Constraints emerges as a significant challenge for teachers implementing inclusive education and differentiated instruction. Participants report difficulties in balancing the need to provide individual support with managing the entire class, often within the limits of a typical school day. Participants like 4 and 5 highlight the struggle to give personalized attention while maintaining overall classroom engagement. Others, such as Participant 7, note that planning differentiated lessons requires additional time and effort to prepare varied materials. Participant 10 points out that tight schedules hinder collaboration with parents, colleagues, and special education professionals—collaboration that is essential for inclusive practices. Limited time, coupled with insufficient resources (as noted by Participant 8), further restricts teachers' ability to implement effective strategies. Additionally, time constraints limit opportunities for professional development. Nonetheless, Participant 6 emphasizes that witnessing student progress makes the effort worthwhile, showing that teachers remain committed despite the time-related challenges.

As determined by Singh, (2023), teachers face the challenge of meeting the diverse needs of all students, including those who may require extra support due to disabilities, learning differences, or other special needs. Given the limited time in each class period, providing the specialized attention that some students require can be difficult. This constraint can make it harder for teachers to effectively individualize instruction, provide additional assistance, or engage in one-on-one interactions that are often crucial for students with specific learning needs. As a result, these time limitations may hinder the success of inclusive education by limiting the ability to create fully responsive and supportive learning experiences for each student. Similarly, Pedroso, Alcalde, Sudario (2022) stated that teachers often find it challenging to balance their time effectively in inclusive classrooms, especially when adapting teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students with special needs. The additional tasks associated with inclusive education, such as modifying lesson plans, preparing specialized resources, and providing individualized support, can become overwhelming. This workload may detract from teachers' ability to deliver quality instruction, as they may have less time for lesson planning, assessing student progress, or refining their teaching strategies.

Managing Diverse Paces

The theme of Managing Diverse Paces highlights the challenges teachers face in supporting students who learn at varying speeds while maintaining an inclusive and engaging classroom environment. Participant 1 stresses the importance of making all students feel valued and motivated, fostering a sense of belonging that supports learning at individual paces. Participant 3 acknowledges the difficulty of addressing different learning rates and ensuring every student remains

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challenged and engaged. Participant 4 emphasizes the need to balance providing extra support to struggling students without slowing down the class's overall progress, often requiring strategies like flexible grouping and individualized instruction. Participant 8 points out the planning and organizational demands of keeping all students engaged in a classroom with diverse learning needs. Additionally, Participant 9 notes that differing backgrounds and behaviors, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms, can complicate classroom management and affect the learning environment. Collectively, the participants highlight the need for adaptive strategies and strong classroom management to meet the needs of students progressing at different rates.

As discovered by Kefallinou, Symeonidou, and Meijer (2020), learners without SEN have exceptional possibilities to gain personal knowledge of diversity when they are placed in interactive learning contexts with learners with SEN. They share their learning time and space with their age-appropriate peers, who frequently require extra care due to their unique traits, which vary from those of most students in diverse ways and to varying degrees. When education respects diversity, valuing its potential, and educational and social inclusion is not grounded in the everyday experiences of sharing these learning opportunities with learners with SEN, who have a face and a name, it is impossible to fully accomplish this essential first step toward developing positive attitudes toward diversity and educational and social inclusion. Similarly, Brown and Johnson (2021) shared that special education focuses on offering individualized support to learners who have disabilities, exceptionalities, or unique learning needs. These learners often need tailored resources, accommodations, or modifications to fully access and benefit from the curriculum. This support can involve specialized teaching methods, adapted materials, and sometimes the integration of assistive technology to help students participate actively in classroom activities. By providing targeted assistance, special education aims to help each learner reach their fullest potential academically, socially, and emotionally, creating opportunities for them to succeed within and beyond the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that the lived experiences of foreign teachers in inclusive classrooms emphasize the critical role of adaptability, collaboration, and continuous professional development. Teachers must tailor their strategies to meet the varied needs of students with special needs, relying on strong partnerships with colleagues, specialists, and families to build effective support systems. Differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and inclusive classroom practices were commonly used approaches, though challenges such as time constraints, limited resources, and managing diverse learning paces were frequently reported. These obstacles highlighted the need for clear, sustainable strategies. In response, the study proposed a "Strategic Action Plan for Inclusive Education" focused on enhancing teacher support and student success through professional development, collaboration, improved resource allocation, and regular assessment. The plan aims to strengthen inclusive practices and ensure all learners, particularly those with special needs, receive equitable and meaningful educational opportunities.

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