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Special Education Teachers' Daily Experiences Providing Alternative Educational Programs for Learners with Special Needs in Kawayan District 1

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ABSTRACT: This study employed the qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of seven (7) special education teachers in Kawayan District I, Biliran, Philippines in implementing responsive collaboration in inclusive education involving learners with special needs. Even though there are existing policies supporting inclusive education, teachers faced difficulties in collaborating with various stakeholders as well as providing appropriate assistance to learners. The current study aimed at investigating teachers' experiences in sustaining their collaboration in the context of inclusive education. Purposeful criterion sampling was used for the selection of participants. Interviews were conducted to obtain data which were then analyzed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke. The key themes that emerged were: (1) Building Collaborative Partnerships for Learner Success that pointed out the significance of establishing efficient relationships and collaboration among teachers, parents, administration, and specialists; (2) Managing Collaborative Challenges in Resource-Limited Environment, where teachers managed to collaborate in spite of the following difficulties: resource shortage, lack of specialists, and overload; and (3) Feeling Professional Growth and Emotional Empowerment through Collaboration, where it was shown that collaboration experience helped teachers to become more competent, resilient, confident, and professionally happy. It has been found out that the responsive collaboration is an essential component of inclusive education since it allows teachers to cope with the learners' needs regardless of the challenging context. Collaboration had beneficial effects both on the learners and on the teachers in terms of their professional development and emotional empowerment. According to the results, the Responsive Collaboration Toolkit for Teachers in Inclusive Education has been elaborated to improve communication skills, collaboration with stakeholders, collaborative problem-solving, resource use, and reflection.

KEYWORDS: adaptive practices, collaborative processes, inclusive education, responsive collaboration, teacher experiences

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education had become an increasingly important global issue because of the international community's concern that all learners, irrespective of disabilities, socio-economic status, cultural affiliation, and differences in learning, should be part of the educational process. Inclusive education was supported by SDG 4 (Quality Education) through a focus on equitable participation, responsive systems, and collaboration that made it possible for schools to accommodate the needs of various learners (UNESCO, 2023). Literature on inclusive education indicated that inclusive education should be regarded not just as an initiative but as a system transformation that should involve the coordinated actions of teachers, families, specialists, and school administrators (Ainscow, 2025).

According to international studies, even though countries had developed inclusion policies, there were inconsistencies in their implementations where most teachers expressed their inadequacy in preparing and lack of support in coordination with other stakeholders (UNESCO, 2026; Cerna, L. et al., 2021). It was through responsive collaboration where flexibility, shared responsibilities, and situational decision-making were key components, that the approach had become vital to develop effective inclusive strategies (Mitchell, 2022; Chow et al., 2023). However, responsive collaboration involved teachers' continuous adaptation of instruction, behavior and communication to match learners' ever-changing needs. Unfortunately, global literature indicated that teachers found it challenging to engage in collaborative efforts because of structural barriers and lack of institutional support (Chaudhary, 2026).

In the Philippine context, inclusive education was an essential component of the country's development goals as outlined in AmBisyon Natin 2040, where the goal was that of a "matatag, maginhawa, at panatag na buhay" for all Filipinos. As such, education emerged as a crucial element of the objective, while inclusiveness became the basis for human capital development (NEDA, 2024). The Enhanced Basic Education Act (K–12), Philippine Development Plan (2023-2028), and the DepEd Inclusive Education Policy Framework (2020) required schools to promote inclusiveness in learning via differentiated instruction, learner support systems, and collaborative professional work. Recently, the EDCOM II Report (2023–2024) singled out inclusive education as the area which required immediate reforms due to the gaps found in teacher readiness, inter-agency cooperation, and school implementation (EDCOM II, 2025).

Nevertheless, teachers of the Philippines encountered many complexities in terms of putting into practice an inclusive education. According to national research, even though there was a generally positive attitude towards the notion of inclusive education, there were many instances when teachers felt unprepared to collaborate within a multidisciplinary team (Atillo et al., 2025; Fernandez et al., 2026). The teachers reported difficulties like lack of clarity of the referral system, inconsistent communications with the families, lack of specialists of special education, and the lack of time for collaborative planning (Llanos et al., 2024; Mabutin et al., 2026). Moreover, responsive collaboration, which implied dynamic and learner-centered teamwork, was not investigated enough by Filipino scholars. Most research were oriented towards studying of co-teaching, parental involvement, and collaborative work at all (Beltran et al., 2025).

In schools, teachers needed to be able to deal with the diverse learner profiles including those learners with learning disability, psychological problems, socio-economic vulnerability and readiness to learn. However, institutional processes for collaboration might be informal, unpredictable and even depend on individual's initiative (Basister et al., 2026). In such way, teachers must use personal initiative, peer support and other measures to meet the demands of learners, thus, demonstrating the lack of consistency between theoretical assumptions and practices on school level.

Kawayan District I acted as a school community wherein inclusion was practiced and developed further. Inclusion was among the basic beliefs held within the community, which made sure that everyone could learn in the classroom irrespective of their abilities. The teacher played an important role in imparting instructions and helping learners with special needs, where they might change their instructional techniques in relation to their parents and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, although there was much literature about inclusion both globally and locally, it was unclear how the teachers in Kawayan District I coped with the difficulties they faced each day regarding inclusion.

Such institutional processes reflected the unaddressed problems in the literature. First, while collaborative work was regarded to be important, there was little information about how teachers perceived and implemented the responsive collaboration within the framework of inclusion. Secondly, collaborative efforts tended to be examined statically and not dynamically as an adaptive measure in response to context. Thirdly, while most of the studies focused on the barriers to the collaboration, they ignored the teachers' efforts and innovative approaches. Finally, local contexts like Kawayan District I did not attract enough attention in terms of the empirical research.

These gaps highlighted the importance of gaining a more thorough understanding from a phenomenological perspective of teachers' experiences with advancing responsive collaboration in inclusive education. Being a basic education teacher who was implementing inclusion practices in an area outside of one's specialization, the researcher could understand her positionality from the perspective of both commitment and challenge. Positionality helped to grasp the nuances of collaboration, such as the conflicts between policy and practice, the emotional labor of working with diverse learners, and teachers' adaptation strategies to ensure their implementation of inclusion practices.

In view of the absence of contextual, institutional, and academic knowledge about this matter, there was an urgent need to look at the lived experiences of special education teachers as they offered alternative educational programs to those learners with special needs in the Kawayan District I area. It was through the experiences of the teachers themselves and their perception of what they did that deeper insights were gained about offering alternative educational programs in rural public schools. Such experiential knowledge was of great importance in improving inclusive practices in Philippine schools.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do special education teachers experience the daily process of providing alternative educational programs for learners with special needs in Kawayan District I?
2. What themes emerge from teachers' lived experiences in planning, delivering, and adjusting alternative educational programs for learners with special needs?
3. What insights can be drawn from the struggles and opportunities teachers encounter while implementing context-based alternative educational programs in their school settings?
4. Based on the findings of the study, what guidelines can be proposed to strengthen the delivery of alternative educational programs for learners with special needs in Kawayan District I?

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design grounded in descriptive phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers in fostering responsive collaboration within inclusive educational settings. The study was conducted in Kawayan District I, Biliran, Philippines, a public-school district where inclusive education was actively practiced across rural and coastal communities. Using purposive criterion sampling, seven (7) licensed teachers with at least three years of experience teaching learners with special needs in self-contained or alternative educational program classrooms were selected as participants. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding collaboration, instructional adaptation, stakeholder engagement, and learner support. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) through the processes of familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Throughout the study, reflexivity was maintained through reflective journaling and continuous self-examination to minimize bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives. Trustworthiness was established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability by means of prolonged engagement with the data, audit trails, peer debriefing, and rich descriptions of the research context and findings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the collaborative experiences of seven (7) teachers involved in inclusive and alternative educational programs for learners with special needs. Selected through purposive sampling, the participants varied in age, educational attainment, and years of experience, providing diverse perspectives on collaboration in inclusive educational settings. The participants ranged from 27 to 45 years old and included four females and three males. Five held bachelor's degrees, one had a Master of Arts in Special Education (MASED), and one possessed a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree. Their teaching experience in inclusive education ranged from three to nine years, with a combined experience of nearly forty years. At the time of the study, all participants were actively engaged in supporting learners with special needs through instructional adaptation, learner assessment, family engagement, stakeholder coordination, and school-based interventions. The study was conducted in public schools implementing inclusive and special needs education programs, where collaboration among teachers, administrators, parents, guidance counselors, therapists, and other stakeholders was considered essential in addressing learners' diverse needs. Collaborative activities such as Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, parent-teacher conferences, individualized educational planning, consultations, case conferences, and home visitations provided opportunities for shared decision-making and coordinated support. These practices were further supported by national and international policies promoting inclusive education, stakeholder participation, equitable access to learning, and shared responsibility in ensuring quality educational opportunities for learners with special needs.

Analysis of the interviews conducted with the seven (7) participants generated three major themes that characterized their experiences of collaboration in inclusive and alternative educational settings. The participants, who varied in age, educational attainment, and years of experience in working with learners with special needs, provided diverse perspectives on collaborative practice. They were actively engaged in inclusive and special needs education programs within public schools where collaboration among teachers, parents, administrators, specialists, and other stakeholders formed an essential component of learner support. Their experiences were shaped by educational contexts that promoted collaborative activities such as Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, parent-teacher conferences, consultations, case conferences, and individualized educational planning. Against this backdrop, the analysis revealed themes that reflected how collaboration supported learner development, the challenges encountered in collaborative practice, and the personal and professional benefits gained through collaborative engagement.

Theme 1: Building Collaborative Partnerships for Learner Success

This theme highlighted the importance of collaborative partnerships among teachers, parents, school administrators, specialists, and other stakeholders in supporting learners with special needs. Participants described collaboration as a shared process involving communication, information exchange, coordinated interventions, and collective decision-making. As Participant 1 shared, "One significant experience was working closely with other teachers and the learner's parents to support a student's needs. Through collaboration, we were able to share observations, adjust our strategies, and provide the learner with more effective support." This statement suggests that effective learner support emerged from collective efforts rather than individual action. The participant's emphasis on sharing observations and adjusting strategies indicates that collaboration enabled stakeholders to combine their knowledge and expertise to address learner needs more effectively. The quotation further demonstrates that collaboration facilitated responsiveness, allowing educational interventions to be adapted based on ongoing learner progress and stakeholder input.

Similarly, Participant 7 emphasized the value of collaborative planning, "I consulted with the class teacher, parents, guidance counselor, and speech therapist of the learner. We used to meet on a regular basis to find out about the progress made by the learner and decided upon strategies that should be adopted both in the school and at home." This account illustrates that

collaboration extended beyond simple communication and involved a systematic process of shared planning, monitoring, and decision-making. The regular involvement of multiple stakeholders suggests that coordinated support across home and school environments was considered essential for meeting learner needs. The statement further implies that collaborative relationships promoted consistency in interventions, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of learner support.

These accounts demonstrated that collaborative partnerships enabled teachers to develop responsive, coordinated, and learner-centered educational strategies that promoted learner success.

Theme 2: Managing Collaborative Challenges in Resource-Constrained Settings

This theme reflected the barriers participants encountered in sustaining collaborative practices. Challenges included time constraints, limited access to specialists, insufficient instructional resources, and differing stakeholder perspectives. Participant 3 described the difficulty of obtaining specialized support, "One of the major challenges I encounter when collaborating in managing a self-contained class or alternative educational program is the lack of a multidisciplinary team. Since specialists such as psychologists, therapists, and other professionals are not readily available in our area, it can be difficult to obtain specialized assessment, intervention, and guidance for learners with disabilities." This statement highlights a structural limitation affecting collaborative practice. The absence of multidisciplinary professionals reduced opportunities for specialized assessment and intervention, placing greater responsibility on teachers to address the diverse needs of learners. The finding suggests that the quality and scope of collaboration were influenced not only by stakeholder commitment but also by the availability of institutional support systems and professional resources.

Likewise, Participant 5 highlighted the problem of inadequate resources, "One of the major challenges I encounter is the lack of resources. Sometimes we do not have enough appropriate instructional materials, equipment, or other resources that could make learning more accessible for our learners." This quotation reveals that resource limitations directly affected the implementation of inclusive educational practices. The lack of appropriate materials and equipment constrained teachers' ability to provide individualized support and may have limited the effectiveness of planned interventions. The statement further suggests that collaboration often occurred within contexts where educational expectations exceeded available resources, requiring teachers to seek alternative solutions.

Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and creativity by utilizing available resources, strengthening communication, and relying on collaborative networks to support learners with special needs.

Theme 3: Experiencing Professional Growth and Emotional Empowerment Through Collaboration

This theme captured the positive impact of collaboration on teachers' personal and professional development. Participants described collaboration as a source of emotional support, motivation, confidence, and professional learning. Participant 1 explained, "Collaboration gives me emotional support and makes me feel more confident in working with learners who need intensive support. It also helps reduce stress because I know that I can rely on others for guidance and support." This statement indicates that collaboration functioned as more than an instructional strategy; it also served as an emotional support system. The participant's ability to rely on others reduced feelings of isolation and uncertainty when addressing complex learner needs. This finding suggests that collaboration contributed to teacher well-being by distributing responsibilities and reinforcing a sense of shared commitment among stakeholders.

Similarly, Participant 3 reflected on the professional benefits of collaboration, "Collaboration has also contributed to my professional growth by allowing me to learn from the experiences and practices of others. It has made me more resourceful, patient, and confident." This quotation illustrates how collaboration promoted continuous professional learning. Exposure to the experiences and practices of others encouraged the development of new competencies and strengthened teachers' confidence in their ability to support learners effectively. The emphasis on becoming more resourceful and patient also suggests that collaboration fostered important professional dispositions that enhanced resilience and adaptability in inclusive educational settings.

These experiences demonstrated how collaboration enhanced teachers' instructional competence, emotional resilience, and professional satisfaction while strengthening their commitment to inclusive education.

In summary, the findings revealed three interconnected themes: Building Collaborative Partnerships for Learner Success, Managing Collaborative Challenges in Resource-Constrained Settings, and Experiencing Professional Growth and Emotional Empowerment Through Collaboration. Together, these themes demonstrated that collaboration was a vital component of inclusive education, enabling teachers to support learners with special needs while navigating contextual challenges and enhancing their own professional competence and emotional well-being. Through participants' accounts, collaboration emerged not only as a strategy for learner support but also as a transformative process that strengthened both educational practice and teacher development.

The primary output of this study was the Responsive Collaboration Toolkit for Teachers in Inclusive Education (RCT-IE), an evidence-based resource designed to strengthen teachers' collaborative practices in inclusive educational settings.

Developed from the lived experiences of teachers, the toolkit provides practical strategies for communication, stakeholder engagement, collaborative problem-solving, resource utilization, and reflective practice to support learners with special needs.

The toolkit was developed in response to the challenges identified by participants, including limited resources, insufficient specialist support, time constraints, and inconsistent stakeholder involvement. It consists of five core components: Communication and Relationship-Building Guide, Stakeholder Engagement Framework, Collaborative Problem-Solving Toolkit, Resource Optimization Strategies, and Reflective Practice and Professional Development Guide. These components are intended to help teachers strengthen partnerships, enhance collaboration, and improve learner support in inclusive classrooms.

The RCT-IE may be utilized by teachers, school administrators, special education coordinators, and other educational stakeholders during Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, case conferences, individualized educational planning, stakeholder meetings, and professional development activities. As a practical application of the study's findings, the toolkit aims to promote effective collaboration, teacher empowerment, and improved educational outcomes for learners with special needs.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the study concluded that responsive collaboration was a vital and ongoing process in inclusive education. Teachers viewed collaboration as a shared responsibility that involved building partnerships, maintaining open communication, and working closely with parents, colleagues, administrators, and other stakeholders to address the diverse needs of learners with special needs. Effective collaboration was grounded in trust, mutual respect, adaptability, and a collective commitment to promoting learner success. The study further concluded that strong collaborative relationships played a crucial role in supporting learners and enhancing inclusive educational outcomes. The findings revealed that teachers relied on positive stakeholder relationships to coordinate interventions and learner support. At the same time, they demonstrated flexibility and commitment in overcoming challenges related to limited resources, heavy workloads, insufficient specialist support, and varying levels of stakeholder engagement. These experiences highlighted that successful inclusive education required both collaborative efforts and teacher adaptability. The findings also showed that responsive collaboration contributed significantly to teachers' professional growth and emotional empowerment. Through collaborative interactions, teachers developed new knowledge, skills, confidence, resilience, and professional satisfaction. Challenges encountered in practice were transformed into opportunities for learning, reflection, and professional development. Consequently, responsive collaboration benefited not only learners with special needs but also teachers by strengthening their competence, motivation, and commitment to inclusive education. Finally, the study concluded that the development of the Responsive Collaboration Toolkit for Teachers in Inclusive Education provided a practical and experience-based resource for strengthening collaborative practices. The toolkit offers guidance in communication, stakeholder engagement, collaborative problem-solving, resource utilization, and reflective practice. Its utilization may help teachers build stronger collaborative relationships, respond more effectively to learners' needs, and enhance the implementation of inclusive educational programs.

Future researchers, graduate students, higher education institutions, and educational agencies may expand this study by examining responsive collaboration across diverse educational settings and educational levels, conducting longitudinal investigations on the development and impact of collaborative practices over time, and assessing the effectiveness of the Responsive Collaboration Toolkit for Teachers in Inclusive Education (RCT-IE) in various school contexts. Further studies may also explore the perspectives of parents, school administrators, specialists, and learners with disabilities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of collaboration in inclusive education. Additionally, quantitative or mixed-method research may be conducted to examine the relationships between responsive collaboration and variables such as teacher efficacy, learner achievement, school climate, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive educational outcomes.

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