

A Phenomenological Study of Educators' Experiences with Neurodiverse Students in Public Elementary Schools

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the lived experiences, teaching strategies, support needs, and insights of teachers handling neurodiverse learners (NLs) in public elementary schools. Using a descriptive-phenomenological qualitative approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 30 teachers in Digos City Division and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that personal growth, emotional challenges, evolving roles, and collaboration shaped their teaching journeys. Teachers implemented a variety of strategies, including adaptive techniques, inclusive practices, and classroom management approaches that foster safe and supportive learning environments. These strategies often stemmed from a combination of formal training, peer support, and practical experience. A central theme in support needs was the call for stronger institutional and professional structures. Teachers also shared meaningful reflections, highlighting dedication, the importance of continuous learning, appreciation for diversity, and a focus on whole-child development. While educators show resilience and commitment, the study underscores the need for enhanced systemic support, including targeted professional development, collaborative opportunities, and inclusive school policies. Understanding teacher perspectives provides valuable guidance for creating effective and inclusive environments that benefit both neurodiverse learners and their educators.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Lived experiences; Neurodiversity; Teacher support.

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, the global movement toward inclusive education has gained momentum, emphasizing the importance of meeting the diverse learning needs of all students, especially those who are neurodiverse. Neurodiversity recognizes conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and Tourette Syndrome as natural variations in the human brain, each with unique strengths and challenges (Alcorn et al., 2024; Hernandez, 2024). Despite increased awareness, many neurodiverse learners remain undiagnosed or unsupported in mainstream classrooms. Subtle signs of neurodevelopmental conditions often go unnoticed, leading to missed opportunities for early intervention and meaningful engagement (Yoro et al., 2020).

Teachers are often the first to observe these differences in learning and behavior, yet they frequently lack the training, tools, and institutional support needed to respond effectively (Leifler, 2020). Neurodiverse behaviors are still often misinterpreted as defiance or inattention rather than being viewed through a lens of neurocognitive

difference (National Children's Bureau, n.d.). Compounding this are systemic barriers, including large class sizes, rigid curricula, and limited access to inclusive resources (Sanchez, 2024). In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 11036 promotes mental health and inclusive education (RA 11036, 2018), and the Department of Education (DepEd, 2021) asserts that every learner should be given equitable access to quality education. Still, many neurodiverse students experience low academic achievement, social isolation, and weak engagement in school activities (Yang et al., 2024; Littlefair et al., 2024; Krasnoff, 2016).

A study by Mandabon (2023) showed that teachers with access to targeted training and support were significantly more prepared to serve neurodiverse learners. Effective inclusion depends on several factors: teacher readiness, collaboration with families, availability of materials, and emotional resilience (Soldovieri, 2024). Without these resources, teachers often feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped, which can negatively impact both their well-being and student outcomes. These challenges underscore the importance of investing in adequate teacher preparation and ongoing professional development that is specifically tailored to inclusive classrooms.

Although there is growing attention to inclusive education in the literature, much of the focus has been on policy development and theoretical models rather than the day-to-day experiences of classroom teachers (Schmidt et al., 2020). A notable gap remains in empirical studies that explore how educators apply inclusion in real-world settings, particularly in local contexts like Digos City, where resources and support systems may differ from national standards. This study aims to explore how teachers in Digos City navigate the realities of teaching neurodiverse learners. Specifically, it examines the strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and the support systems that either aid or hinder their efforts. By highlighting their lived experiences, this research seeks to inform teacher training programs, enhance inclusive education policies, and strengthen institutional support for educators. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to the creation of learning environments where all students, regardless of neurological makeup, can thrive.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in supporting neurodiverse learners (NLs). Phenomenology is particularly suited to studies that aim to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their day-to-day realities (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). As defined by Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research seeks to capture the essence of participants' experiences by focusing on their subjective perceptions and emotions. This design aligns well with the study's goal of uncovering the meanings teachers attach to their roles, challenges, and strategies in inclusive education settings. To gather comprehensive and nuanced data, the study employed both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). In-depth interviews enabled participants to reflect privately and share personal insights without influence from peers, leading to more profound emotional and cognitive revelations. Meanwhile, FGDs provided an opportunity for collective sharing, where participants could validate, extend, or challenge each other's experiences, enriching the overall understanding of the phenomenon. The combination of these methods ensured both depth and breadth of data, strengthening the study's validity and credibility.

2.2 Research Participants

The study involved 30 teacher-participants from public elementary schools in the Digos City Division, including classroom advisers, subject teachers, guidance counselor designates, and school coordinators who regularly interacted with neurodiverse learners. A screener survey was distributed to 75 teachers across four public elementary schools to identify those who met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 38 qualified based on their current teaching roles, a minimum of one academic year of experience working with learners diagnosed or suspected to have ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, or other learning differences, and active engagement in inclusive practices such as differentiated instruction or the use of assistive technology. From this group, 30 participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in teaching levels, school contexts, and learner profiles. While participants were not designated as Special Education (SPED) teachers, those with relevant training or workshop experience in inclusive education were included. This distinction was made to focus on general education teachers' experiences, as they are more likely to encounter neurodiverse learners without formal SPED support. The selection process aimed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives and ensure that participants had meaningful, firsthand experiences with inclusive classroom practices.

2.3 Research Instruments

Two primary instruments were used in the study: a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group discussion (FGD) protocol. These tools were selected to align with the phenomenological research design, which emphasizes openness, depth, and the exploration of personal meaning. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for individualized, in-depth conversations, allowing participants to share their unique experiences, challenges, and strategies for supporting neurodiverse learners. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 15 participants, typically lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The FGD protocol, on the other hand, was designed to foster collective reflection and dialogue, helping to validate shared experiences and uncover common themes. Three FGD sessions were held, each with 5 to 6 participants, and each session lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes. Both instruments were reviewed and validated by a panel of education researchers and experienced teachers. Their feedback was used to refine the clarity, relevance, and alignment of questions with the study's objectives. This validation process ensured that the instruments would elicit rich and meaningful responses. Copies of the validated tools and supporting documentation are included in the appendices.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, approval was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent, Public Schools District Supervisors, and school principals. Upon clearance, a screener survey was administered to 75 teachers across four public elementary schools to identify those who met the study's inclusion criteria. Interested and eligible teachers were then contacted through the phone numbers they voluntarily provided. In the second stage, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 qualified participants. Each interview was scheduled at the participants' convenience and followed a validated semi-structured interview guide. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were held in quiet, private spaces to ensure comfort and focus. With the participants' consent, all sessions were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and support reliable transcription. The third stage involved conducting three focus group discussions (FGDs), each composed of 5 to 6 participants. These sessions used the same semi-structured guide to facilitate open dialogue and collective reflection. FGDs lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes and were also audio-recorded with consent. All audio recordings were transcribed promptly after each session. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms throughout the documentation and analysis process. Transcripts were returned to participants for review and verification, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of their responses. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and data confidentiality, were strictly observed throughout, with detailed procedures further discussed in the Ethical Considerations section.

2.5 Data Analysis

The study employed Colaizzi's (1978) Descriptive Phenomenological Method to guide the analysis of qualitative data. This rigorous seven-step process included: (1) familiarization with the transcripts, (2) identification of significant statements, (3) formulation of meanings, (4) clustering of themes, (5) development of an exhaustive description, (6) reduction to a fundamental structure, and (7) validation through member checking. Participant validation was conducted by returning the findings to participants for review and feedback, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately captured and interpreted. To further strengthen the credibility of the analysis, a data analyst was engaged to cross-check emerging thematic clusters against the raw transcripts. This collaborative review helped confirm that interpretations were faithful to participants' lived experiences. Themes were refined through iterative analysis until a final, coherent set of findings was developed. The structured approach ensured that results were both methodologically sound and grounded in authentic teacher narratives.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the Schools Division Office of Digos City. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All personal information and responses were kept confidential, with pseudonyms used in all transcripts and reports. To ensure data credibility, participants were given the opportunity to review and validate their interview and FGD transcripts before these were analyzed. Recordings and transcriptions were stored securely, accessible only to the researcher and data analyst. There were no conflicts of interest or anticipated risks to participants. The study adhered strictly to ethical research practices to protect the dignity and rights of all participants.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Lived Experience in Handling Neurodiverse Learners

Five themes emerged from teachers' experiences in handling NLs in the classroom, as found in Figure 1. These included increased individual awareness, difficulties in teaching and learning practice, role development, navigating the support system, and mental and emotional struggles. Details of these themes are shown in the appendix.

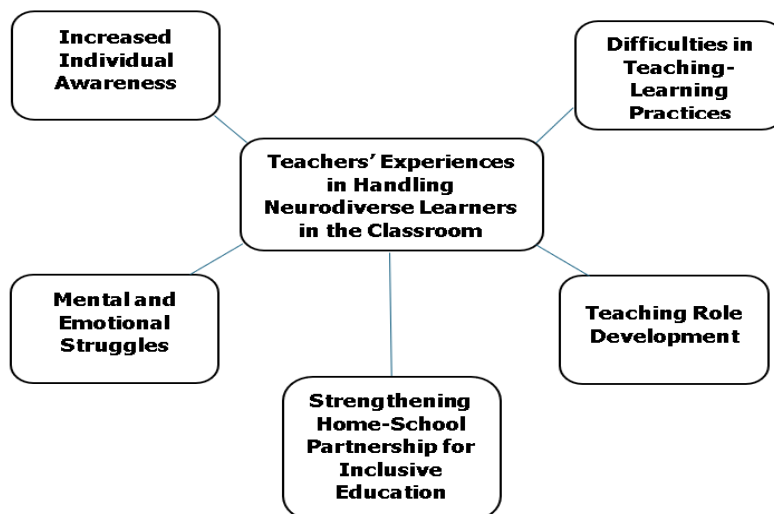


Figure 1. Themes Constructed for Teachers' Experiences in Handling Neurodiverse Learners in the Classroom

Increased Individual Awareness

The first central theme that emerged from the data is Increased Individual Awareness. This theme highlights how teachers' direct experiences with neurodiverse learners (NLs) led to a deeper recognition of student individuality and heightened learner sensitivity. As teachers worked closely with NLs in inclusive classrooms, their awareness expanded beyond general pedagogical strategies to a more nuanced understanding of learner-specific needs, behaviors, and potentials.

Student individuality. Teachers observed that each neurodiverse learner brought a distinct set of abilities, preferences, and learning styles into the classroom. This realization marked a shift from a one-size-fits-all mindset to one that values diverse cognitive and behavioral patterns.

"Teachers typically see neurodiversity as an important aspect of student development, recognizing that each student has unique strengths and challenges." KIIP2-L7-8- Pg1

This quote illustrates how teachers have come to appreciate neurodiversity not as a barrier, but as a variation in human learning and behavior. Such reflections align with the growing body of literature that emphasizes neurodiversity as a natural aspect of human difference (Alcorn et al., 2024). As teachers shifted away from deficit-based views, they adapted their classroom approaches accordingly. This shift supports the findings of Leifler (2020), who noted that teachers become more inclusive when they acknowledge individual learner profiles.

Learner sensitivity. Increased awareness also translated into greater sensitivity in how teachers interacted with neurodiverse learners. Teachers expressed a deliberate effort to be cautious with their language, tone, and feedback to avoid unintentionally harming students' emotional well-being.

"I have to be so cautious when talking to them about my observations and personal assessments so as not to hurt them."
— KIIP11- L38-39- Pg 2

This illustrates a heightened emotional intelligence and empathy, underscoring the teacher's role in creating a psychologically safe learning space. Research by Hernandez (2024) supports this finding, indicating that learner-sensitive communication fosters better engagement and trust in inclusive settings. Teachers' recognition of the emotional and social dimensions of learning reflects what Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) describe as a shift

toward “inclusive pedagogy,” where responsiveness to individual learners is central. The combination of recognizing student individuality and exercising learner sensitivity represents a foundational change in teachers’ perspectives. Rather than viewing NLs as needing “special” treatment, teachers increasingly saw them as deserving of equitable, respectful, and customized support, an awareness that lays the groundwork for more inclusive practices.

Difficulties in Teaching-Learning Practices

The second central theme that emerged was Difficulties in Teaching-Learning Practices. This theme captures the multifaceted challenges that teachers face when educating neurodiverse learners (NLs) in mainstream classrooms. As inclusion becomes increasingly embedded in the goals of 21st-century education (Department of Education, 2021), the demand for differentiated instruction continues to grow. However, many educators find themselves unprepared to address these diverse needs (Cook, 2024), revealing a persistent gap in teacher training and systemic support.

Classroom disruptions. One of the dominant challenges is the frequent classroom disruptions caused by behavioral outbursts and meltdowns, which can significantly derail teaching and learning. As Yoro et al. (2020) emphasized, these behavioral manifestations demand heightened attention and crisis management skills from mainstream educators.

"My most challenging was when there were times na sagunsun ang meltdowns in class, hitting classmates so managan ang mga classmates pagawas sa room kay makig away man siya. It is difficult, and it disturbs the rest of the class." KIIP8-L42-45-PG2

This statement, originally from the local dialect, describes a situation where meltdowns occurred in succession, causing other students to flee the classroom out of fear. The teacher's account reflects the emotional toll and classroom chaos that can result from this. These disruptions, if frequent, challenge a teacher's ability to maintain a conducive learning environment, thus limiting instructional time and affecting peer learning dynamics.

Uneven skill profiles. A second concern is the uneven skill profiles of neurodiverse learners. Teachers often find themselves adjusting to extreme academic variability in the same classroom.

"One of my students, for instance, was very imaginative and skilled at telling stories, but he had trouble following multistep directions." KIIP6- L16-19-Pg1

This highlights a learner with strong verbal creativity but difficulties in executive functioning. As Clouder et al. (2020) note, neurodiverse learners frequently show “spiky profiles,” excelling in some areas while lagging significantly in others. Teachers must reconcile these discrepancies, often without formal training or tools, resulting in frustration and instructional inefficiency.

Academic performance challenges. This sub-theme reflects the overlap between slow-paced learning and broader learning difficulties, which both significantly affect the academic progress of neurodiverse learners. These challenges manifest in delays in mastering basic skills such as reading, writing, and math, as well as difficulty understanding and following instructions. Learners may require more time, repeated instruction, and individualized support to grasp concepts that peers typically acquire more quickly.

"They perform way slower than their normal age level, like a Grade 4 who reads like a Grade 1 learner." KIIP1- L16-17-Pg1

"It can be noticed, “jud ma’am,” that they are struggling with reading, speech, writing, and solving simple operations." KIIP14- L20-21- Pg1

The local expression “jud ma’am” (an emphatic affirmation) underscores the teacher's certainty and concern. These struggles can compound over time, lowering student confidence and reinforcing academic gaps.

These responses illustrate how academic underperformance is a consistent challenge, often requiring pedagogical adjustments that many teachers are not trained to make. Fisher (2024) emphasizes that such difficulties, rooted in

cognitive, language, or emotional factors, can undermine both the learner's confidence and the teacher's instructional momentum. According to Nwachukwu et al. (2024), these challenges necessitate the implementation of inclusive strategies, differentiated instruction, and adequate support systems to prevent long-term educational setbacks. Ultimately, academic performance challenges hinder inclusive teaching when educators lack the training and resources to adapt lessons, provide scaffolding, or apply multi-sensory learning approaches. Addressing this sub-theme requires not just instructional creativity but institutional support through targeted teacher training and resource allocation.

Support and attention demands. Another recurring issue is the constant demand for support and attention, which often leaves teachers feeling overstretched.

"Neurodiversity for me, you need to give attention for them to thrive; giving attention is essential." KIIP8- L7-Pg1

This observation aligns with Soldovieri (2024), who asserts that neurodiverse learners flourish under conditions of personalized attention. However, teachers juggling large classes often cannot meet these demands, affecting both NLs and neurotypical students.

Behavioral and social differences. Some statements suggest that one of the observable manifestations of a neurodiverse learner is behavioral and social differences, which emerge as the sixth sub-theme contributing to the difficulties teachers experience while teaching. NLs exhibit a deviated type of behavior from normal. This refers to actions or responses that significantly differ from what is typically expected or considered standard within a given context. In educational settings, according to the discussion, this can manifest in various ways, such as avoiding eye contact during interactions, exhibiting hyperactivity with a short attention span, being unable to differentiate risk, struggling to regulate their emotions, and often having tantrum episodes, particularly among neurodiverse learners.

"..they react and answer to what you say differently, also, they behave not like the normal grade 5 students would." KIIP4 - L10-11-Pg1

This statement highlights the discrepancy between expected behavior and actual behavior. According to McLean (2022), such behavioral inconsistencies necessitate specialized behavior management strategies, which mainstream teachers may not be equipped to implement effectively.

Sensory and attention difficulties. The sensory sensitivities and short attention spans of NLs further impede their classroom engagement. As Mirfin-Veitch et al. (2020) point out, learners with sensory processing issues often become overwhelmed by environmental stimuli.

"They are very distracted by noise, temperature in class, even with brightness, which causes their moods to change, which is uncontrollable." KIIP3- L17-19-Pg1

This highlights the unpredictable impact of external stimuli on students' emotional and cognitive states, which in turn affects their ability to learn and engage. As Leibel and Sigurðardóttir (2023) stress, without sensory-friendly accommodations, these students face significant disadvantages.

Teachers' lack of training. The final and most foundational sub-theme is the teachers' lack of training, which underlies many of the aforementioned difficulties. When teachers lack knowledge of neurodiversity, their confidence and competence in addressing learning and behavior issues diminish (Aguilar et al., 2020).

"I do not know how to handle them. I do what I can, but teachers handling them should be trained." KIIP8-L93-94-Pg5

"I struggle every day. I find it difficult knowing that I am not trained on how to handle neurodiverse learners." KIIP11-L85-86- Pg4

These issues not only affect classroom climates but also hinder teachers' ability to implement effective teaching practices, making it all the more important to explore support systems for teachers in greater detail (Dignath et al., 2022). These candid reflections underscore the urgent need for specialized training in inclusive education. As

Leifler (2020) notes, closing this knowledge gap is essential for achieving meaningful inclusion and positive learner outcomes.

The second theme presents a compelling portrait of the pedagogical hurdles teachers face when working with neurodiverse learners in mainstream settings. The combined impact of behavioral disruptions, learning difficulties, attention needs, sensory issues, and teacher unpreparedness creates a complex web of instructional challenges. Collectively, these factors reveal a gap not only in classroom strategies but also in systemic support and professional development. Without sufficient training, resources, and institutional backing, teachers are likely to continue struggling. Thus, this theme suggests an urgent call for policy changes, investment in inclusive teacher training programs, and the integration of flexible pedagogical approaches that uphold the principles of equity and neurodiversity in education.

Mental and Emotional Struggles

The third central theme that emerged from the teachers' experiences in handling neurodiverse learners is the mental and emotional toll that the demands of inclusive teaching bring. These struggles stem largely from teaching exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy, and a lack of institutional support. As Dignath et al. (2022) argue, educators working in inclusive environments are particularly vulnerable to emotional strain due to the heightened responsibilities they face, especially when they are unprepared to manage diverse learner profiles. The resulting frustration can lead to emotional exhaustion, diminished motivation, and strained classroom interactions—all of which negatively impact both teacher well-being and student outcomes.

Teaching exhaustion. One of the most pronounced effects reported by teachers is the sheer emotional and mental fatigue that comes from trying to accommodate varying student needs while meeting curriculum expectations. As Reeve and Cheon (2021) suggest, sustained exposure to high-pressure classroom demands without adequate coping mechanisms leads to emotional depletion. This is exacerbated by the lack of tailored training and support for managing neurodiverse learners.

"These challenges can be mentally exhausting at times, as I strive to meet every student's needs while managing classroom dynamics." KIIP2-L70-71-Pg4

This quote highlights how emotional weariness is not an occasional occurrence but a recurring struggle that influences the overall teaching experience.

Demotivation. Following emotional exhaustion, many teachers also reported a drop in morale and intrinsic motivation. When they feel that their efforts are not producing meaningful progress, or when institutional support is lacking, demotivation sets in. This aligns with findings by Wang and Chen (2024), who emphasize that persistent stress without visible results erodes teachers' professional satisfaction and increases the risk of burnout and attrition.

"I feel frustrated and lose motivation to do the job." KIIP9-L48-49-Pg3

This reaction captures the emotional strain that extends beyond classroom difficulties, illustrating how the teacher's inner state affects the classroom environment and student participation. In addition to lowering the quality of instruction, teachers' emotional detachment has an indirect impact on neurodiverse students, who might be more perceptive of emotional cues.

Together, these sub-themes—teaching exhaustion and demotivation—show that teachers' emotional well-being is crucial to inclusive education. A caring, responsive learning environment is more challenging to create when teachers are emotionally spent and unsupported. This theme conveys an obvious message: to maintain inclusive practices, investing in emotional and psychological support networks, such as peer debriefing, mentorship, and mental health resources, is just as crucial as funding teacher training. The pursuit of inclusive education will remain unfinished and unsustainable if these internal conflicts are not addressed.

Teaching Role Development

Despite the emotional and instructional challenges discussed earlier, many teachers evolve in remarkable ways as they continue their journey of working with neurodiverse learners (NLs). This led to the emergence of the fourth central theme: Teaching Role Development. This theme captures how the process of teaching NLs shapes

educators both personally and professionally. It illustrates how inclusive education not only impacts learners but also transforms the teachers themselves. Through daily encounters with diverse student needs, teachers develop new perspectives, refine their pedagogical philosophies, and uncover new capacities within themselves. The following sub-themes—teaching drive, sense of fulfillment, challenging teaching roles, maintaining classroom dynamics, developing empathy, and growth and self-discovery reveal how these transformations unfold and how they are rooted in the broader context of inclusive education and neurodiversity.

Teaching drive. This central motivator for educators is navigating the complexities of inclusive classrooms. Teachers expressed an internal enthusiasm and unwavering commitment to support every learner, regardless of their differences. This drive propelled them to innovate, adjust, and persevere—even when classroom challenges mounted.

"I view neurodiversity as an asset rather than a challenge in my role as a teacher." KIIP6-L7-8-Pg1

Such statements reveal how inclusive education reshapes teacher identity: from content deliverers to compassionate facilitators of learning who embrace student diversity as a strength.

Sense of fulfillment. Following the teaching drive is a deep sense of fulfillment, which was consistently expressed when teachers witnessed progress among their NLs. Even minor improvements brought significant emotional rewards, reinforcing their purpose and sustaining their dedication despite daily struggles.

"For me, seeing progress in my students' growth helps balance the stress and reminds me of the importance of my work. It gave me that rewarding feeling that, at some point, I was effective." KIIP2-L31-33-Pg2

This fulfillment becomes a sustaining force, shifting the focus from obstacles to possibilities in inclusive classrooms.

Challenging teaching roles. This sub-theme stemmed from the varying learning needs and styles of neurodiverse learners (NLs). This refers to teachers finding the role challenging. However, they recognize their obligation to support NLs even though it can be a constant struggle. Meeting these varied needs can be daunting, as teachers work to include all students in modifying their teaching strategies to suit different methods.

Meeting these needs while balancing classroom dynamics contributes to the challenges teachers have in teaching neurodiverse students effectively.

"Neurodiversity means difficulty with different learning styles; it is challenging for me." KIIP4-L7-8-Pg1

This sub-theme highlights how inclusive education pushes teachers to the edge of their professional limits, while also inviting growth beyond conventional teaching boundaries.

Maintaining classroom dynamics. The fourth sub-theme in teaching role development is maintaining classroom dynamics, which refers to the complex task of managing a classroom with diverse student needs while ensuring a cohesive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers must create an environment where every student feels valued, supported, and engaged (Nwachukwu et al., 2024). This responsibility becomes increasingly demanding when neurodiverse learners (NLs) are present in large class sizes. In such settings, the broad spectrum of learning styles, cognitive capacities, behavioral patterns, and support requirements can become overwhelming (Vo & Webb, 2024).

"These challenges can create tension and uncertainty in the classroom, affecting not only the neurodiverse learner but also their peers." KIIP5-L62-63-Pg3

This underscores the broader systemic challenge of inclusive education, how to maintain equity and harmony in diverse and often overcrowded learning spaces. Teachers usually find themselves walking a tightrope, balancing individualized instruction for NLs with the broader needs of the class. Providing tailored support, while also keeping the entire group on track, demands significant emotional, cognitive, and logistical effort. When resources are limited, the strain intensifies, affecting not only instructional delivery but also classroom harmony and overall

well-being. As a result, maintaining a positive and productive classroom climate becomes a daily challenge that requires adaptability, resilience, and strategic classroom management.

Developing empathy (seeing through the learner's eyes). Over time, teachers develop more profound empathy, not just as a professional skill, but as a moral commitment. Engaging with NLs requires teachers to go beyond academic goals and connect with students' emotional worlds, fostering compassion and greater understanding.

"It has given me a broader perspective on learners having these difficulties and being able to empathize with the role in teaching these learners. It has given me an understanding of what their struggles are and has helped me try to ease their burden, even in the tiniest way, every day." KIIP1-L61-64-Pg3

This empathetic lens often serves as the foundation for a more human-centered teaching philosophy, one that is aligned with the spirit of inclusive education.

Growth and self-discovery: becoming more than a teacher. Lastly, these experiences lead to growth and self-discovery. Teachers come to understand their limits and potential more clearly. They learn patience, flexibility, creativity, and self-reliance—traits that are essential not only for teaching but for personal development.

"It broadened my horizon in terms of being creative in my strategies... it has tested my limits." KIIP13-L118-119-Pg8

This transformation goes beyond professional improvement. As Chow et al. (2023) suggest, teachers who reflect deeply on their experiences often emerge with renewed self-confidence, resilience, and a redefined sense of purpose.

Together, these sub-themes illustrate that the path of teaching neurodiverse learners, although challenging, is also profoundly transformative. Teachers evolve from being mere facilitators of learning into reflective practitioners, empathetic mentors, and inclusive advocates. This theme reinforces a powerful idea: inclusive education is a two-way street, where both student and teacher grow. As teachers adapt to meet the needs of NLs, they are simultaneously reshaped, both emotionally and intellectually, and professionally, highlighting the profound personal dimension of teaching within inclusive settings.

Strengthening Home-School Partnerships for Inclusive Education

Strengthening home-school partnerships is the fifth major topic that arose from teachers' experiences working with neurodiverse students. This highlights how significant collaboration between educators and families can pave the way for transformative routes toward inclusive education. This theme demonstrates that support is fostered by affirming connections and constant communication with parents, in addition to existing in the classroom. Parents' approval often serves as the starting point for closer, longer-term cooperation, thereby strengthening the teacher's role and enhancing student achievement. This theme highlights the importance of parental collaboration and affirmation in inspiring educators, promoting inclusive practices, and fostering a sense of collective responsibility for the success of neurodiverse students.

Parents' affirmation as a catalyst. The first sub-theme, parents' affirmation, centers on how teachers feel acknowledged and valued when parents express appreciation for their efforts with neurodiverse learners. Participants noted that this affirmation goes beyond simple gratitude; it provides emotional validation, boosts morale, and reinforces the teacher's belief in the effectiveness of inclusive strategies. Such positive reinforcement strengthens teachers' intrinsic motivation, creating a foundation for more trusting and engaged relationships between schools and families.

"It gives me a sense of fulfillment when the parents appreciate what I did for their daughter." KIIP7-L38-39-Pg2

In this sense, parents' affirmation serves as more than encouragement; it acts as an entry point into a more profound and sustained partnership, fostering an environment of mutual respect and shared goals.

Evolving toward parent-teacher collaboration. Building on that foundation, the second sub-theme, parent-teacher collaboration, highlights the importance of a cooperative alliance between educators and families in meeting the diverse needs of neurodiverse students. Teachers emphasized that once trust is established through

affirmation, parents become more open and involved, enabling honest dialogue and co-creation of intervention plans. Collaboration typically involves regular updates, consultations, joint problem-solving, and shared decision-making on the learner's behavioral, academic, and emotional development.

One teacher described a situation where communication with the adviser led to parental involvement in crafting a more effective response to a student's needs:

"I reported it to the adviser, and we talked about it. Then I suggested informing parents about it so that we can gain a better understanding. Yeah, so this was the time when parents were told." KIIP4-L50-53-PG4

Such collaborative practices are essential in inclusive education. They ensure that strategies used at home and in school are aligned, that learners receive consistent support, and that early interventions are possible through shared observations and assessments. The presence of a strong parent-teacher partnership enhances responsiveness to student needs and reinforces the teacher's role as part of a broader network of care.

This subject emphasizes the importance of collaborative ecosystems in fostering inclusive education. The advantages go well beyond the classroom when parents support and encourage teachers, and when both sides participate in ongoing dialogue and collaborative decision-making. These collaborations provide constant, comprehensive support for neurodiverse students by bridging the gap between home and school. These relationships help teachers develop a stronger sense of shared accountability and purpose.

3.2 Strategies Teachers Use to Manage and Support Neurodiverse Learners in Inclusive Classrooms

The second objective of this research is to investigate how teachers can effectively manage and support neurodiverse students in inclusive classrooms. Four emerging themes related to this topic are presented in Figure 2.

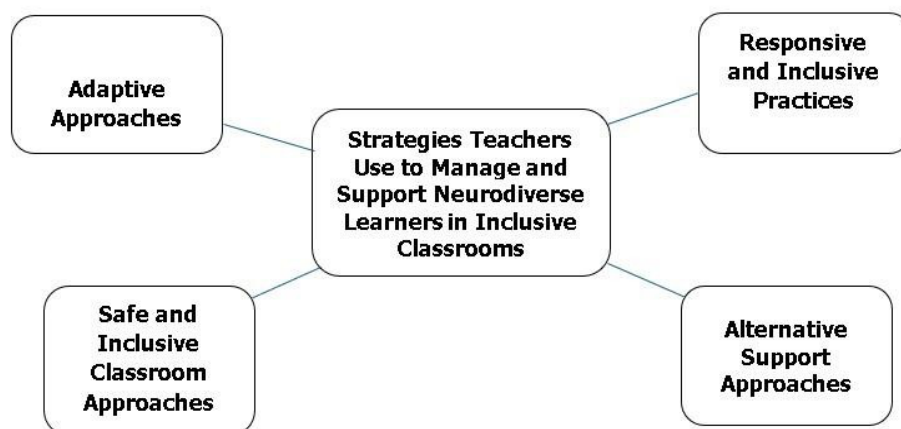


Figure 2. Themes Constructed for Strategies Teachers Use to Manage and Support Neurodiverse Learners in Inclusive Classrooms

Adaptive Instructional Strategies

The first dominant theme, Adaptive Instructional Strategies, emerged from teachers' uniform responses regarding the dynamic methods they adopt to address the diverse needs of neurodiverse learners. These strategies represent the foundation of inclusive teaching, promoting accessibility, engagement, and growth for every learner.

Monitoring progress and behavior. This theme highlights the first sub-theme, progress monitoring practice, which refers to the need for keeping systematic records of students' success, milestones, and behavioral progress. Monitoring academic development enables teachers to pinpoint individual strengths and weaknesses (Schmidt et al., 2020), helping them to adapt their teaching methods effectively.

"I track their behavioral progress through behavioral checklists found on Google, anecdotal records, and incident logs." KIIP9-L74-75-Pg4

This quote illustrates the practical use of various tools to collect behavioral data, which supports individualized planning and timely feedback. Progress monitoring practices typically involve regular check-ins and observations to ensure ongoing progress and effectiveness. In learning environments with different abilities, the application becomes vital in ensuring every child is on a track aligned to their potential and pace.

Flexible and engaging methods. Teachers utilize visual aids, incorporate mobility breaks, and employ hands-on activities to engage students in meaningful learning. These methods enhance comprehension and motivation by tapping into students' natural interests and energy cycles (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2020).

"I call the child to do some fun activities like jigsaw puzzles, cartooning, Rubik's cube, building with popsicle sticks, and so on (sort of manipulatives). I call this a mental break." FGDP4-L343-345-Pg15

This shows the value of integrating student-preferred activities as tools for engagement and emotional regulation. Additionally, scholars Mirfin-Veitch and co-authors stated that mobility breaks are a flexible approach that enables students to become active, reset their concentration, and minimize anxiety, which is beneficial for students with attention difficulties, as mentioned by the participant in their statements.

Instructional differentiation. This sub-theme combines the ideas under student-centered adaptations and simplifying activities for accessibility. Teachers modify content, teaching strategies, and outputs based on students' preferences, cognitive abilities, and learning styles. Strategies include using manipulatives, providing simplified instructions, and adjusting delivery pace. This enables equitable access to learning while maintaining high expectations. For instance, one teacher noted:

"I even adjust my strategies in teaching to cater to their preferences." KIIP1- L68-69-Pg4

"I give her a simple activity. Because she is a good reader, I assigned her to read aloud to the class." KIIP7-L41-42-Pg2

These insights reflect a conscious shift in pedagogical approaches to better align with each learner's unique strengths and needs. Educators who embody empathy and a growth mindset demonstrate the capacity to individualize instruction, thereby enhancing student engagement and motivation. By simplifying content and tailoring learning experiences, teachers empower students to take ownership of their learning. This fosters not only improved academic outcomes but also supports students' mental well-being by reducing anxiety and promoting resilience (Ulug et al., 2011). Moreover, such inclusive practices cultivate self-esteem and encourage the development of critical thinking and social responsibility.

Behavioral redirection. This strategy involves calmly diverting students from unproductive or disruptive behaviors to constructive tasks. It is beneficial for students with attention or behavioral challenges, as it helps maintain a peaceful classroom dynamic.

"I provide activity sheets to keep them busy, and I let them sit on the ground by the corridor for a change of scenery." FGDP9-L318-320-Pg14

The strategy reflects how space and structured tasks are effectively used to refocus learners without escalating conflict.

In summary, Adaptive Instructional Strategies reflect the essential flexibility that inclusive education demands. Teachers' ability to modify content, pacing, and methods ensures that neurodiverse learners are not only accommodated but also empowered to participate meaningfully in classroom life.

Responsive and Inclusive Practices

This theme centers on how teachers proactively cultivate inclusive environments through personalized and anticipatory approaches. In education, this refers to a pedagogy that identifies, values, and accommodates the varying needs, backgrounds, and abilities of all learners. This may include hands-on learning, accommodating flexible seating or quiet areas for students who require a more peaceful setting to concentrate or manage their emotions, using straightforward language, or conducting one-on-one checks to ensure students with language

barriers or processing needs. Such a practice supports equity, belonging, and full participation in the learning process.

Tailoring instructions for diverse needs. Teachers adjust lesson content, pace, and delivery to accommodate different cognitive and emotional profiles. Customized lesson plans and the use of concrete materials enable NLs to thrive (Ker & Van Gorp, 2024).

"I create customized lesson plans and use manipulatives to support their learning, but I am not consistent as I do not have enough time." KIIP13-L24-25-Pg2

Teachers adjust content presentation, pace, and tasks according to each student's strengths, challenges, and learning styles. This response reveals a strong intent to differentiate instruction, albeit limited by time constraints, and highlights systemic challenges to inclusive practices.

Establishing structure and predictability. This sub-theme refers to establishing clear routines and behavioral expectations that can help minimize disruptions. Anticipating challenges and visualizing classroom scenarios helps maintain control and support students' needs effectively.

"I address these issues by implementing positive behavior reinforcement and providing clear, consistent guidelines." KIIP5-L96-97-Pg5

"I focus on proactive strategies...Predictability kana bitaw tantyahun na nimo unsay mahitabo. Picture out na ba so kit an na nako dapat." KIIP5-L68-69-Pg3

The local dialect used is translated as "Predictability means you can anticipate what's going to happen. You can already visualize the outcome."

The participant's statement emphasizes the importance of structured and foreseeable routines in classroom management, especially for neurodiverse learners. In this context, predictability refers to the teacher's ability to foresee possible classroom scenarios and prepare in advance. This proactive approach helps reduce uncertainty and anxiety for both the teacher and the students.

For neurodiverse learners, particularly those with autism, ADHD, or anxiety-related challenges, predictable environments offer a sense of stability and emotional safety. When students are aware of what to expect, it minimizes cognitive overload and supports their focus, self-regulation, and participation. This aligns with Ker and Van Gorp's (2024) assertion that predictability in instructional routines and transitions contributes to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Thus, the participant's emphasis on "visualizing the outcome" reflects a pedagogical strategy rooted in foresight and intentionality. It enables teachers to anticipate challenges, maintain consistency, and create a calm, secure environment where all learners, especially those with heightened sensitivity to change, can thrive academically and socially.

Providing personalized support. The fourth sub-theme is customized support. Teachers offer additional academic and emotional assistance through follow-ups, tutorials, and one-on-one sessions.

"I do more follow-up with these neurodiverse students." KIIP1-L34-35-Pg2

This intensive support ensures no learner is left behind and fosters relationships based on trust, guidance, and encouragement. The teacher finds time and offers tutorial time. It is an intensive, one-on-one, supportive learning activity designed to address their specific academic and emotional needs. Such sessions provide learners with a secure and organized forum in which to learn at their own pace, ask questions openly, and receive personalized guidance and support.

Responsive and inclusive teaching practices help teachers meet NLs where they are, academically and emotionally, by providing structure, anticipating needs, and offering individualized support that cultivates equity and growth. Teachers shape these individuals, which makes them one of the most essential parts of the equation.

Safe and Inclusive Classroom Approaches

The third central theme for the teachers' strategies used highlights the creation of an environment where every child feels respected, valued, and secure, essential for effective learning (Wang & Chen, 2024). Emotional safety comes first; teachers create a classroom environment in which students feel free to be themselves without fear of judgment or bullying (National Children's Bureau, n.d.), underpinned by clear anti-bullying policies and a culture of kindness. Six sub-themes were identified from the responses, highlighting the value of safety and inclusive classroom approaches.

Fostering emotional safety. The first sub-theme in creating a safe and inclusive classroom approach is emotional safety. This is one of the building blocks of a safe and supportive classroom, especially for neurodiverse students.

"I also made sure to create a safe space for all students to express themselves." KIIP2- L39-40-Pg2

According to Soldovieri (2024), creating an environment where students can feel safe to share their thoughts, feelings, and difficulties without ridicule or rejection. This can be achieved through consistent communication, routine, and establishing norms that foster mutual respect and understanding among peers.

Encouraging peer collaboration. Encouraging peer collaboration is a strategic and socially inclusive practice that supports neurodiverse learners, particularly those who face challenges in communication, social interaction, and group work. Peer collaboration not only helps students complete academic tasks but also serves as a vital context for developing interpersonal skills such as turn-taking, empathy, negotiation, and active listening.

"Encouraging peer support, knowing friends/ classmates no, importante jud ni sila kung matudloan sa awareness sa neurodiversity in class, with their help, this can create a kinder environment, a more inclusive classroom." KIIP2-L 65-68-Pg3

The participant's statement highlights the transformative potential of peers in fostering inclusion. Translated and contextualized, the participant emphasizes that classmates play an essential role in creating an inclusive environment, especially when they are made aware of and educated about neurodiversity. This implies that building peer awareness is key to cultivating empathy and acceptance. When peers understand the needs and strengths of neurodiverse classmates, they are more likely to provide meaningful support rather than judgment or exclusion. Such collaboration promotes a culture of kindness, reduces stigma, and enhances the sense of belonging among all students.

Encouraging peer collaboration, therefore, not only aids academic achievement but also serves as a foundation for an inclusive school culture. It enables NLs to feel valued and understood, while fostering mutual respect and cooperation – skills essential for lifelong learning and civic participation.

Promoting open communication. A critical element in fostering a safe and inclusive classroom is the ability of teachers to promote open communication. This third sub-theme underscores how creating space for students to express themselves enables teachers to address both academic and socio-emotional concerns proactively.

In inclusive classrooms, especially those with NLs, encouraging students to voice their thoughts, emotions, and needs contributes to a sense of psychological safety and trust. When learners feel heard and understood, they are more likely to engage, take risks, and participate actively in the learning process.

Teachers who foster such environments demonstrate qualities of empathy, emotional readiness, and responsiveness, traits essential for inclusive education (Mandabon, 2023). By inviting learners to express their concerns, teachers not only support individual emotional regulation but also preemptively resolve potential conflicts, misunderstandings, or behavioral issues.

"I also encourage students to express their feelings and needs, which helps in reducing anxiety." KIIP5-L69-70-Pg3

This statement reflects the teacher's deliberate effort to validate students' emotions and reduce anxiety, especially for neurodiverse learners who may struggle with emotional expression. Encouraging open dialogue fosters self-awareness and emotional safety (Ulug et al., 2011).

By modeling respectful communication, teachers foster trust and mutual understanding, enabling them to provide responsive and empowering support. This approach is vital for students who may feel excluded due to cognitive or behavioral differences.

Ultimately, encouraging open communication fosters an inclusive classroom where students feel heard, valued, and emotionally secure, aligning deeply with the theme of safe and inclusive classroom approaches.

Creating a calm and supportive classroom environment. The fourth sub-theme involves using strategies that help learners regulate their emotions, manage stress, and restore focus when they are overwhelmed. A well-designed sensory environment plays a critical role in this process, especially for neurodiverse learners (NLs) in inclusive settings. According to Leifler (2020), calm and sensory-responsive spaces are essential for addressing individual sensory needs and reducing overstimulation.

"I use calming strategies like prayer, music, and deep breaths to set a positive tone and calm students." KIIP9-L58-59-Pg3
This quote reflects the teacher's proactive use of simple yet effective self-regulation techniques to create a peaceful atmosphere. The use of prayer, music, and breathing exercises helps establish a predictable routine that signals emotional safety. For NLs who often experience sensory overload or heightened anxiety, such routines provide grounding and comfort, making the classroom feel more manageable and secure.

These practices not only benefit individual learners but also foster a shared culture of calm, helping all students develop coping skills and empathy for one another.

In conclusion, creating a calm and supportive classroom environment highlights the importance of sensory-aware teaching and emotional regulation in fostering spaces where every learner, particularly neurodiverse students, can feel secure, focused, and prepared to learn.

Using positive reinforcement. This strategy involves the intentional use of praise and affirming feedback to encourage desirable behaviors, participation, and effort among learners. Praise and encouragement support desired behavior and build confidence.

I am mindful that positive reinforcement is what they need from the teacher." FGDP2-L108-109-Pg5

Leifler (2020), in her study *Teachers' Capacity to Create Inclusive Learning Environments*, emphasized that focusing on learners' capabilities through encouragement contributes to a more inclusive and empowering classroom climate. Moreover, positive reinforcement focuses on strengths, motivating learners, and promoting constructive behavior.

Respecting autonomy and individuality. A key sub-theme in building a safe and inclusive classroom is respecting students' independence and individuality. This means teachers consciously avoid coercive practices and instead allow learners, particularly neurodiverse learners (NLs), to make choices and express their preferences. Doing so promotes self-determination and deepens their engagement in the learning process.

"Teachers treat them like everyone else." KIIP11-L42-Pg2

This quote reveals the teacher's effort to normalize inclusion, ensuring that NLs are not singled out or treated differently. This equitable treatment affirms their dignity and supports a sense of belonging. Respecting autonomy, as emphasized by Ahn et al. (2021) and Reeve & Cheon (2021), involves giving learners the freedom to make decisions without being forced into activities that may cause distress. When teachers recognize and support individual learning styles, sensitivities, and boundaries, they create an environment that fosters authentic participation.

In conclusion, honoring autonomy and individuality not only nurtures learner confidence but also encourages meaningful participation on the students' terms. This respectful approach is essential to fostering a truly inclusive classroom, one that upholds safety, dignity, and empowerment for all learners.

Alternative Support Approaches

As teachers work to meet the needs of neurodiverse learners (NLs), they often develop strategies that move beyond traditional pedagogical practices. The fourth emerging theme, *Alternative Support Approaches*, encompasses these adaptive measures used to manage fatigue, control classroom dynamics, and respond to the individualized needs of learners. These approaches, though unconventional or not widely encouraged, are implemented with careful thought and empathy. Their goal is not exclusion but adequate support that prioritizes student well-being and classroom harmony.

Deliberately ignoring is a de-escalation strategy. One such alternative is the *deliberate ignoring* of certain behaviors. This classroom management technique involves temporarily withholding attention from minor, non-threatening disruptive acts that could distract others. By doing so, teachers aim to avoid reinforcing such behavior, thereby allowing the student to self-regulate without needing public correction or embarrassment. As Leifler (2020) notes, inclusive teaching includes managing emotional responses wisely and creating environments where learners can reset without shame.

"In case of tantrums or sudden meltdown, I walk them out of the situation." KIIP14-L87-88-Pg4

This participant illustrates a sensitive approach that prioritizes emotional safety. Rather than confronting or disciplining the student in front of peers, the teacher helps de-escalate the situation quietly. This not only preserves the student's dignity but also protects the learning atmosphere for others. Such an approach emphasizes the teacher's role as a calm and responsive facilitator, critical for inclusive and emotionally secure classrooms.

Demainstreaming as temporary support. Another emerging approach is demainstreaming, where NLs are temporarily placed outside the mainstream classroom to receive more specialized interventions. While this may appear to counter the ideal of inclusion, teachers view it as a supportive and strategic step, meant not to isolate but to help students succeed in a setting better suited to their immediate needs. According to Florian and Spratt (2013), inclusive education is not about identical experiences for all but about equitable support that leads to meaningful participation.

"I think neurodiverse students must be catered to separately." KIIP12-L35-Pg2

This quote reflects the teacher's genuine concern for the well-being and academic progress of NLs. Rather than forcing uniformity, the teacher advocates for flexibility in placement based on what helps the student thrive. Temporary separation is framed not as exclusion, but as preparation for eventual reintegration, with the necessary scaffolds in place.

In summary, this theme represents the nuanced decisions teachers make to preserve classroom order while attending to the complex needs of neurodiverse learners. Though such strategies may challenge traditional inclusive norms, they reflect a deeper understanding of individualized support and compassionate teaching. By thoughtfully applying methods like deliberate ignoring or demainstreaming, teachers demonstrate their commitment to both inclusion and effectiveness, ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to succeed within supportive and adaptable educational environments.

3.3 Teachers' Support Needs in Handling Neurodiverse Learners

Teachers need a strong and stable support to meet the diverse needs of NLs. One theme emerged, along with five sub-themes, as illustrated in Figure 3, highlighting the urgent need for holistic, long-term support systems to empower teachers in effectively managing NLs. Teachers in the study emphasized that, in addition to personal effort and effective classroom management, there is a need for broader institutional support to address the diverse needs of inclusive education. While teachers are the frontline of the educational system, this support will enhance their deliverables and foster a common goal for all.

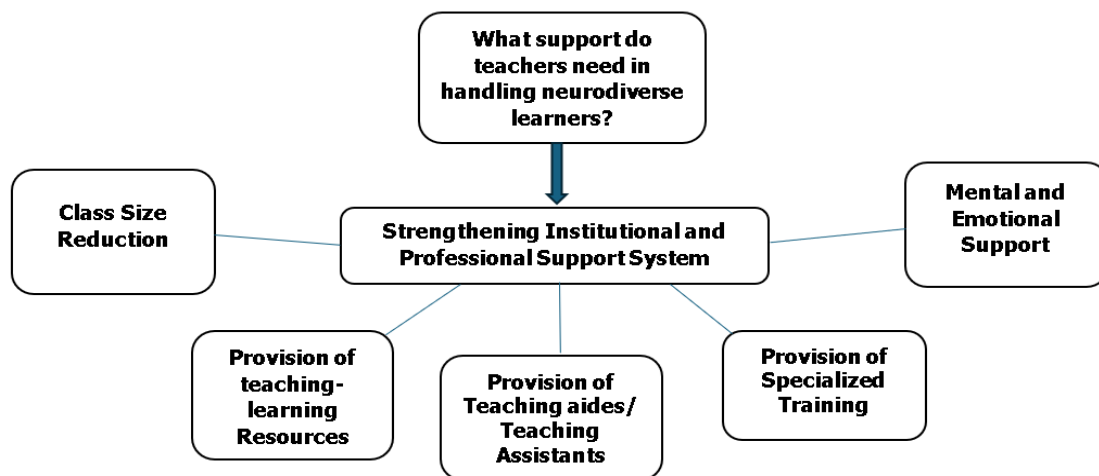


Figure 3. Emerging Theme from the Support Teachers' Needs in Handling Neurodiverse Learners

Strengthening Institutional and Professional Support Systems

This theme covers the systemic, logistical, and emotional accommodations teachers require to teach NLs effectively. It captures how both structural conditions (such as class size, aides, and resources) and professional capacity (such as training and well-being) need to be addressed to facilitate inclusive strategies, knowledge, faith, diversity, and individual strengths, ultimately leading to holistic education.

Class size reduction. The first sub-theme in this topic is the class size reduction, emphasizing the need for teachers to reduce class sizes, particularly when NLs are mainstreamed into ordinary classrooms. This idea is based on the belief that smaller classes can significantly enhance the learning experience for all pupils, particularly those with diverse needs (Chow et al., 2023).

"Having smaller class sizes or additional classroom aides would also help provide more individualized attention to neurodiverse learners." KIIP2-L142-147-Pg7

This teacher's insight reinforces the idea that structural adjustments must support inclusive education. By reducing class size or adding support personnel, teachers can better monitor and respond to the unique needs of NLs without compromising the pace and quality of instruction for the rest of the class. Smaller groups also facilitate stronger teacher-student connections, better behavior management, and a more responsive learning environment.

Provision for teaching-learning resources. This sub-theme emphasizes the essential need for suitable instructional materials, assistive tools, and adaptive technologies that enable teachers to reach and support neurodiverse learners (NLs) effectively. In inclusive education, the availability of differentiated resources plays a pivotal role in addressing the diverse learning needs of students. Without access to suitable materials, even the most dedicated teachers may struggle to effectively implement inclusive strategies.

"Access to assistive technology is also vital for supporting neurodiverse learners academically and socially." KIIP2- L87-88-Pg6

When NLs have access to the right tools, they are more likely to feel competent, connected, and involved in classroom interactions. The absence of such resources often forces teachers to rely solely on generalized teaching methods, which can unintentionally exclude or disengage learners with unique needs.

Literature supports this concern. According to Leifler (2020) and Chow et al. (2023), inclusive education depends not only on teacher competence but also on the availability of institutional supports such as instructional aides and technological tools. Assistive technologies, visual supports, and tailored activity materials allow NLs to access content, demonstrate understanding, and participate meaningfully alongside their peers.

Provision of teaching aides or assistants. The third sub-theme of strengthening institutional and professional support systems refers to the support staff who provide essential assistance to teachers by helping to manage diverse learning needs within the school. In the discussion, the need for teaching aides or assistants is highlighted as it can provide individualized support to neurodiverse students, ensuring they receive the attention and guidance they need to succeed (Alix, 2023). They can assist in implementing instructional strategies, aid in group activities, and help with classroom management. This collaborative method enriches the learning environment, enabling instructors to focus on delivering practical lessons while ensuring that every student receives the support they need to succeed.

"I receive support from admin and colleagues through collaborative planning...resources like a teaching assistant are paid through class funds by parents." KIIP2-L138-140-Pg6

This participant's insight reveals both the recognized value of teaching assistants and the limitations in institutional support, highlighting that some teaching aide positions are not institutionally funded but instead rely on parent contributions. While the support from colleagues and school leadership is commendable, the sustainability and equity of such arrangements may be limited without systemic investment.

Provision of specialized training. Chow et al. (2023) mentioned that nearly two-thirds (65%) of the examined studies highlight the perceived need for teacher training among teachers. Teachers emphasized the importance of targeted training to improve their ability to support neurodiverse learners (NLs) in inclusive classrooms effectively. This type of professional learning fosters both competence and confidence in understanding conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, and equips teachers with research-based strategies for inclusive practice (Sweetapple, 2022; Mandabon, 2023).

"Access to professional development on neurodiversity; Importante kayo siya na support sa akoo, kay makatabang siya sa mga teachers na makakuha ug makahibalo." KIIP2-L90-92-Pg7

This statement reflects the teacher's strong belief in the value of professional learning as foundational support. The local expression *"importante kayo siya na support sa akoo"* translates to "this is critical support for me," indicating the teacher's reliance on training to build their capacity for inclusive teaching. The phrase *"makakuha ug makahibalo"* means "to acquire and understand," reinforcing the idea that training enables teachers to gain new insights and apply inclusive strategies effectively.

This aligns with Sweetapple's (2022) view that teachers must be equipped with accurate information about neurodiverse conditions to create responsive classrooms. Likewise, Mandabon (2023) emphasizes that teachers trained in neurodiversity are better equipped to accommodate diverse learning needs, adapt instruction, and foster student engagement.

Emotional and mental support. This fifth sub-theme highlights the importance of addressing not only the academic but also the psychological and emotional well-being of both teachers and neurodiverse learners (NLs) in inclusive education settings. Emotional resilience among teachers is crucial, as their ability to remain empathetic and supportive directly influences how they respond to the diverse needs of their students (Stein et al., 2024). As Nwachukwu et al. (2024) emphasized, effective inclusive classrooms are built on a foundation of psychological safety, where learners feel accepted and understood.

"I am wishing that there will be help in any way, because difficult is an understatement." KIIP1-L81-82-Pg5

This statement reflects a deep sense of emotional fatigue and underscores the teacher's urgent plea for psychological and institutional support. The phrase *"difficult is an understatement"* emphasizes the overwhelming nature of the challenges faced, suggesting that current support systems are inadequate. This emotional burden can diminish a teacher's ability to consistently offer patience and empathy toward NLs, which are essential components of inclusive teaching.

Despite the presence of RA 11036, also known as the Mental Health Act of the Philippines, which provides a legal framework for an integrated mental health system, its benefits remain underutilized in educational settings. Teachers often lack access to counseling, wellness programs, or even time for self-care, which limits their ability

to develop the emotional resilience necessary for inclusive education. Without proper support, they may struggle to sustain the compassion and flexibility needed to teach neurodiverse learners effectively.

The need for robust institutional and professional support structures is emphasized by the five sub-themes, which include reducing class sizes, offering teaching and learning resources, employing teaching assistants, providing professional training on neurodiversity, and offering emotional and mental support. Together, these components give educators the skills, information, and emotional fortitude they need to support neurodiverse students. Their integration signifies a systematic commitment to inclusive education, where instructors and students receive support, even outside the classroom. By strengthening these support networks, we can create a more fair, accommodating, and caring learning environment where inclusion is not only practiced but also maintained.

3.4 Teachers Constructed Meanings from Their Experiences as Educators of Neurodiverse Learners

Four themes emerged to reflect the teachers' constructed meanings from their experiences as educators of neurodiverse learners, as found in Figure 4. These were dedication and passion, drawing strength from knowledge and faith, diversity and individual strength, and holistic education.

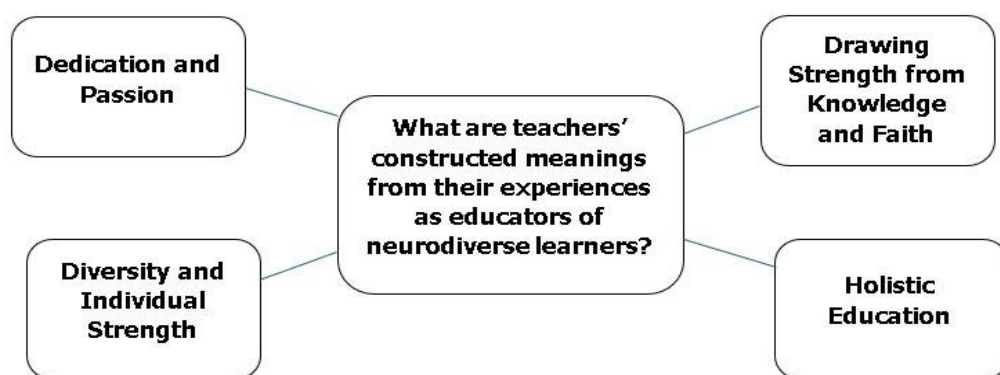


Figure 4. Themes Derived for Teachers Constructed Meanings from Their Experiences as Educators of Neurodiverse Learners

Dedication and Passion

The first central theme that emerged from the narratives of teachers working with neurodiverse learners (NLs) is dedication and passion. These attributes form the core of inclusive teaching practices, especially when addressing learners with varying needs. As Ulug et al. (2011) emphasize, a teacher's attitudes and behaviors play a critical role in shaping students' personalities and academic success. This idea is echoed in Yang et al. (2024), who reinforce that passion in teaching enhances student engagement and well-being, particularly in inclusive education settings.

Importance of teachers' dedication and passion. Teachers' passion and commitment are essential in creating inclusive and supportive environments for neurodiverse learners. Passionate educators go beyond compliance; they inspire, energize, and personalize learning. Their commitment builds trust, fosters persistence, and contributes to emotionally safe learning spaces. According to Wang and Chen (2024), passionate teachers are more likely to explore innovative approaches, personalize instruction, and persevere in challenging situations. This is especially significant when working with students who require differentiated support and greater patience.

"Working with neurodiverse learners has reshaped my understanding by showing me that being an effective educator means being flexible, patient, and creative." KIIP7-L147-149-Pg7

This statement illustrates how the teachers' lived experience led to a more profound transformation in their teaching philosophy. It reflects a shift toward adaptive practices, grounded in empathy and sustained by passion. The participant acknowledges that actual effectiveness in inclusive classrooms is not just about knowledge delivery, but also about embodying flexibility, patience, and creativity – qualities reinforced by Ulug et al. (2011) as foundational to student success and well-being.

In the broader context, this theme underscores the emotional and professional commitment required of educators navigating inclusive settings. Teachers' passion directly influences their ability to connect with NLs, adapt strategies, and persevere through daily challenges. Their dedication is not just a personal trait; it is a professional asset that supports the development of inclusive, equitable classrooms where every learner has the opportunity to thrive.

Flexibility, patience, and creativity in teaching. A significant aspect of teachers' dedication and passion lies in their flexibility, patience, and creativity, traits that surfaced consistently in participants' reflections. These qualities empower teachers to adjust their strategies to meet the unique learning styles and emotional needs of neurodiverse learners (NLs). Flexibility allows educators to adapt lesson delivery, patience gives learners the time and space to process content at their own pace, and creativity ensures that learning activities remain engaging and accessible to all.

As Leifler (2020) asserts, inclusive teaching demands a high level of responsiveness to learner diversity, requiring that teachers deviate from standardized approaches to meet individual needs. Wang and Chen (2024) further highlight that neurodiverse learners benefit most when educators integrate adaptive thinking and creative problem-solving in their practice.

"It has made me realize how crucial the role of teachers is in the lives of these learners. It takes burning passion and dedication to be able to accommodate them." KIIP4-L123-125-Pg6

This quote highlights the profound self-awareness that emerges from inclusive teaching. The participant acknowledges the weight of responsibility in shaping the educational experiences of neurodiverse students and emphasizes the emotional labor and dedication it demands. The mention of "burning passion and dedication" reflects the internal drive necessary to consistently demonstrate patience and creativity, particularly when facing behavioral or cognitive challenges in the classroom.

The participant's insight reinforces what Mucella Ulug et al. (2011) discussed: that the teacher's attitude, perseverance, and adaptability directly influence student growth and classroom atmosphere. When teachers show flexibility, they offer students a sense of belonging and validation, which is vital for learners who often feel excluded or misunderstood.

Drawing Strength from Knowledge and Faith

Building on the idea of flexibility, patience, and creativity for inclusive teaching, educators also revealed how their inner sources of strength — particularly intellectual development and spiritual grounding — help them cope with the daily demands of supporting neurodiverse learners (NLs). This theme underscores the dual foundation of *knowledge and faith* as interdependent elements that sustain teachers' resilience and commitment in the classroom.

Lifelong knowledge. Participants described how ongoing learning and intellectual growth empower them to teach more effectively and with greater confidence. Through continuous professional development and reflective practice, teachers not only enhance their instructional skills but also deepen their capacity to respond to the unique needs of NLs.

This is supported by Reeve and Cheon (2021), who emphasized that professional learning promotes autonomy-supportive teaching, an approach proven effective in inclusive classrooms. Likewise, Cook (2024) noted that lifelong learning enhances teachers' ability to analyze situations critically, make informed decisions, and adapt strategies —key traits for managing neurodiverse needs.

"Teachers' knowledge in handling these kids, I believe, will go a long way." KIIP1-L91-Pg6

This quote highlights the participant's belief in the lasting value of teacher expertise in shaping inclusive education. The phrase "will go a long way" suggests a long-term, ripple effect, not just in classroom success but in building systems of equity for NLs. It reflects the idea that a well-equipped teacher can transform not only individual student outcomes but also broader school practices.

Praying for strength. Alongside intellectual preparation, many teachers cited spiritual faith, particularly prayer, as an essential source of emotional and psychological support. Faith, for these educators, provides a grounding sense of purpose, comfort in times of uncertainty, and renewed energy to face the daily challenges of teaching neurodiverse learners.

As supported by Nwachukwu et al. (2024), emotional well-being is a critical factor in sustaining inclusive teaching, and spiritual practices can serve as personal coping mechanisms that reinforce resilience. Teachers' reliance on prayer aligns with studies suggesting that spiritually grounded educators often exhibit greater emotional regulation and endurance (Stein et al., 2024).

"I always pray to God, ma'am, every day when I wake up, bug at siya pamalandungon. (It is heavy if you come to think of it.) I pray for more patience, strength, positivity, and good health for me." KIIP15-L61-63-Pg3

This quote reveals the emotional weight of teaching NLs, which the participant metaphorically describes as *bug-at* or "heavy." The act of praying becomes both a daily ritual and a psychological anchor, reminding us that teachers often seek strength beyond professional preparation. It reflects the personal depth of teaching, where faith becomes a form of silent perseverance.

This theme illustrates how teachers' resilience stems from a blend of *lifelong learning* and *spiritual strength*. Intellectual development equips them with the tools to handle diverse educational challenges, while faith nurtures their emotional and psychological well-being. Together, these sources of strength serve as a dual foundation for inclusive teaching. In the broader context of neurodiverse education, this theme underscores the importance of supporting not only teachers' skills but also their inner capacities, cultivating both mind and spirit to sustain inclusive practices.

Diversity and Individual Strengths

Following the exploration of internal strength through knowledge and faith, teachers also emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity and individuality of their learners, particularly those who are neurodiverse. This theme underscores the shift from viewing learner differences as barriers to celebrating them as foundations for inclusive and empowering education. Teachers in this study consistently recognized that each NL brings unique strengths, perspectives, and ways of learning that can enrich the classroom experience for everyone.

Unique strengths and challenges. Participants described how recognizing both the strengths and challenges of neurodiverse learners is crucial to shaping responsive instruction. Rather than focusing on deficits, they emphasized identifying learners' capabilities and tailoring their pedagogy accordingly. This approach aligns with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which advocate for multiple means of representation and engagement based on students' differences (Meyer et al., 2014).

Sweetapple (2022) supports this approach, emphasizing that inclusive education becomes more effective when teachers design instruction around learners' strengths while providing support for their areas of need. When educators recognize NLs' specific abilities—whether in visual thinking, creativity, or pattern recognition—they foster a culture of affirmation rather than remediation.

"True education is about recognizing and nurturing each student's unique strengths, and creating an environment where everyone can thrive in their own way." KIIP2-L172-174Pg8

This statement encapsulates the core belief of the theme: that diversity is not a hurdle but an opportunity. The participant highlights how education becomes more meaningful when it is built on what each learner can do, not just on what they struggle with. The phrase "everyone can thrive in their way" signals a learner-centered mindset where teaching adjusts to fit the student, not the other way around.

By embracing this philosophy, teachers are better equipped to craft lessons that resonate with NLs' interests, abilities, and preferred learning modalities—whether auditory, visual, or kinesthetic. In doing so, they foster not just inclusion, but genuine participation and empowerment.

Individual learning needs. Each student is unique. Students learn in diverse ways, at different paces, and with varying strengths. In inclusive classrooms, especially with neurodiverse learners, recognizing and addressing individual learning needs is essential. Teachers in this study emphasized the importance of adapting instruction to each learner's profile to ensure meaningful and equitable participation.

"Teaching neurodiverse learners reveals that learning is not linear. Students do not progress in a straight, predictable path; instead, learning success comes in different forms and paces." KIIP9-L107-109-Pg5

This quote illustrates a teacher's recognition that standardized progression models do not apply uniformly in inclusive classrooms. Instead, learning is dynamic and requires adaptive teaching that values varied pathways to growth. This insight reinforces Sweetapple's (2022) assertion that honoring student individuality promotes both equity and empowerment. By embracing learners' distinct paces and styles, educators not only foster inclusion but also amplify student potential.

Theme 3 reinforces the idea that valuing neurodiverse learners for their unique contributions leads to richer, more inclusive learning environments. Rather than seeing individual differences as obstacles, the teachers in this study embraced them as guiding principles for instruction. This shift in mindset, from deficit to asset, reflects the broader goals of inclusive education and calls for teaching practices that adapt to and uplift each learner. As a whole, this theme supports the notion that diversity, when understood and respected, becomes a powerful educational tool.

Holistic Education

The fourth and final theme, Holistic Education, captures one of the most powerful insights drawn from the teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms. This theme highlights the notion that education encompasses not only academic performance but also the development of the whole child, encompassing their emotional, social, moral, and psychological well-being. Teachers described how working with neurodiverse learners (NLs) transformed their perception of teaching, revealing that success in the classroom is not measured only by test scores, but by how well students feel understood, supported, and valued.

This approach aligns with the Whole Child approach advocated by the Department of Education (DepEd) and ASCD (2012), which emphasizes that each child deserves to be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged, according to DepEd Order No. 72, s. In 2009, inclusive education involved the "transformation of schools to cater to all children, including those with diverse learning needs," not just by modifying teaching strategies but by reshaping educational values toward empathy, acceptance, and belonging.

Development before grades. A key sub-theme that emerged was the development of skills before grades. Teachers emphasized the importance of fostering positive values, emotional regulation, confidence, and interpersonal skills, especially for NLs who may struggle in traditional academic settings. They stressed that while grades offer a snapshot of performance, they do not capture the complete picture of a learner's growth or effort. Educating neurodiverse students requires prioritizing character development, coping strategies, and social inclusion alongside academic pursuits.

As one teacher shared:

"Working with neurodiverse learners has shown me that effective teaching goes beyond academic success; it is about fostering a sense of belonging and understanding in every student." KIIP5-L116-118-Pg8

This quote encapsulates the heart of holistic education. The teacher's words reflect a shift in perspective, from simply imparting knowledge to nurturing each child's humanity. It also reinforces the findings of Cohen et al. (2019), who emphasized that holistic education encourages inclusive relationships and strengthens emotional and social competencies among all learners.

In classrooms where teachers adopt this mindset, NLs are not only more likely to thrive academically, but they also develop stronger self-esteem and emotional resilience, qualities essential for long-term success in life. This theme is closely tied to the earlier themes of dedication, flexibility, and individual strengths, all of which are foundational to the practice of holistic and inclusive education.

4.0 Conclusion

This study illuminated the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in Digos City as they worked with neurodiverse learners. Rather than simply documenting instructional challenges or emotional strain, it brought forth a deeper understanding of what it means to teach inclusively from the perspective of those at the front lines. By centering teacher voices, this research makes a meaningful contribution to the discourse on inclusive education, positioning teachers not merely as implementers of policy but as experts whose insights should inform it.

The findings underscore that inclusive education is not sustained by awareness alone; it requires concrete tools, contextualized training, and responsive school systems that affirm both learner variability and teacher well-being. These voices advocate for transformative shifts in teacher education, emphasizing practical strategies for managing neurodiversity, implementing differentiated instruction, and fostering emotional resilience. Policy reforms must follow, prioritizing ongoing professional development, collaborative school ecosystems, and mental health support for educators.

For classroom practice, the study advocates for a learner-centered approach that recognizes neurodiversity not as a challenge to be fixed, but as a richness to be understood and celebrated. This means rethinking curricula, co-creating flexible learning environments, and investing in a school culture where difference is not merely accepted but valued.

Looking forward, future research may explore the longitudinal impact of institutional support on teacher retention and student outcomes in inclusive settings or examine parent-teacher collaborations in neurodiverse education. Ultimately, this study offers a timely reminder: inclusion is not a program, but a mindset, and teachers, when empowered, are the key to making it real.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Reyes conceptualized and designed the study, conducted the interviews and led the data analysis. She also drafted and finalized the manuscript. The co-authors Sabud, Fuentes, Almeraz and Arnado, contributed to refining the methodology, assisted in coding and thematic analysis, and provided critical feedback on the manuscript drafts. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, and there were no commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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