

Lived Experiences of Teachers in Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Input for A Training Program

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream classrooms in Santiago City, Isabela. Anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the research examined instructional strategies, teacher preparedness, stakeholder support, and challenges encountered in integrating learners with ASD into regular classroom settings. The study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design involving elementary teachers from Santiago South Central School and Santiago North Central School during the School Year 2025–2026. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience teaching learners with ASD. Data were gathered through questionnaires, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The instruments underwent expert validation, while reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.70. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis using Taguette software. Findings revealed that teachers utilized structured routines, visual supports, differentiated instruction, positive reinforcement, and visual scheduling to support learners with autism in inclusive classrooms. However, teachers experienced significant challenges related to insufficient training, limited instructional materials, difficulties in assessment practices, and inconsistent stakeholder support. The study also found that collaboration among parents, administrators, and government institutions contributed positively to inclusive education, although operational and resource limitations remained evident. To address these concerns, the study proposed the CARES action plan aimed at strengthening teacher capacity, instructional support, stakeholder collaboration, and inclusive classroom practices. The study aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education by promoting inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for learners with disabilities. It also supports SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities through advocacy for equitable access and participation in education for learners with ASD. The study contributes to educational and institutional sustainability by promoting stronger support systems, continuous teacher development, and collaborative inclusive education practices that foster equitable and supportive learning environments.

Keywords: Assessment Practices; Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); Differentiated Instruction; Inclusive Education; Stakeholder Support; Structured Routines; Teacher Preparedness; Visual Supports

1. Introduction

Inclusive education promotes equal learning opportunities for all students, including learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), within mainstream classrooms. The increasing integration of students with ASD into general education settings highlights the need for effective instructional strategies, teacher preparedness, and collaborative stakeholder support. Although inclusive policies and legal frameworks have strengthened access to education, teachers continue to experience challenges related to communication, behavior management, differentiated instruction, assessment, and limited institutional support. Existing literature emphasizes the importance of evidence-based practices, collaboration among stakeholders, and continuous professional development in ensuring successful inclusion. However, gaps remain between policy implementation and classroom realities, particularly in the Philippine context. This study explores the experiences of elementary teachers in Santiago City regarding stakeholder support for inclusive education and the integration of learners with ASD into mainstream classrooms.

1.1 Background of Stakeholder Support and Inclusive Education for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Inclusive educational practices aim to provide equal learning opportunities for students regardless of physical, cognitive, or emotional limitations. Students with ASD particularly benefit from inclusion in mainstream classrooms; however, communication difficulties, behavioral challenges, and socialization issues often hinder effective integration. Historically, students with disabilities were educated in segregated settings, where attention was focused more on disabilities than academic potential (Francisco et al., 2020). Contemporary educational reforms now advocate inclusive education to ensure equitable access and participation for all learners. Nevertheless, many educators still report insufficient preparation for

inclusive classroom teaching (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Stites et al., 2018). Successful inclusion requires teachers to possess knowledge of co-teaching, collaboration, and evidence-based instructional strategies (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; McLeskey et al., 2019). Teachers also require continuous training, professional development, and confidence in implementing inclusive practices. Studies indicate that students taught by highly qualified teachers achieve better academic outcomes (Brown et al., 2019; Cannon et al., 2012). However, many regular education teachers lack adequate preparation to modify curricula and provide appropriate accommodations for students with ASD. Teaching children with ASD is cognitively demanding because teachers must assess individual learning needs, implement personalized interventions, and monitor progress effectively (Elleman & Oslund, 2019). In the Philippines, inclusive education is supported by Republic Act No. 7277, Republic Act No. 9442, Republic Act No. 11650, and DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009, which mandate accessible and inclusive education for learners with disabilities. Despite these policies, implementation challenges persist due to limited resources, insufficient teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate collaboration among stakeholders. The study focuses on elementary teachers in Santiago City who experience challenges in integrating learners with ASD into mainstream classrooms. Teachers often feel frustrated and underprepared due to the lack of specialized support services, instructional materials, and behavior management training. Effective inclusion therefore requires collaborative support from administrators, parents, therapists, special education teachers, local government units, and community stakeholders.

1.2 Themes and Insights on Inclusive Instructional Practices, Teacher Preparedness, and Stakeholder Support for Learners with ASD

Existing literature consistently emphasizes the importance of stakeholder support, evidence-based instructional practices, collaboration, and teacher preparedness in promoting inclusive education. Stakeholder support remains critical in ensuring equitable educational opportunities. Kaushik (2025) emphasized the structured roles of parents, administrators, and communities in inclusive education, while Capillo and Naanep (2025) found that although stakeholders demonstrate positive attitudes toward inclusion, practical support remains insufficient in Philippine elementary schools. Beltran et al. (2025) identified curriculum adaptation practices but also highlighted challenges related to inadequate training and facilities. Likewise, Taghap and Pabalan (2025) and Custodio (2025) noted the persistent disconnect between inclusive education policies and actual implementation. Research on inclusive instructional practices shows that effective inclusion depends on the implementation of scientifically validated strategies supported by educational laws and policies (Gottfried et al., 2019; McLeskey et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2016). However, many teachers continue to rely on traditional approaches due to limited training in evidence-based practices (Cook & Cook, 2013). Teachers frequently report inadequate preparation for differentiated instruction and inclusive teaching (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Ricci et al., 2017; Schles & Robertson, 2019; Zagana et al., 2017). Stites et al. (2018) further revealed that pre-service teachers express concerns regarding their readiness for inclusive classrooms. Collaboration between general and special education teachers is also central to effective inclusion. Co-teaching and shared instructional responsibilities improve differentiated instruction and reduce teacher isolation (Garderen et al., 2012; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022). However, barriers such as insufficient planning time, communication gaps, unclear roles, and inadequate training limit successful collaboration (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Daniel et al., 2018; Mueller et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017; Zagana et al., 2017). Literature on how children with autism learn emphasizes structured, visual, and individualized instructional approaches. Tutt, Powell, and Thornton (2006) argued that predictable routines and visual supports reduce anxiety and improve participation among children with autism. Lawson (2011) further explained that learners with autism often respond best to highly focused, interest-driven instruction tailored to their cognitive strengths. Studies on teacher preparation indicate that existing certification pathways often fail to equip educators for inclusive classrooms. Traditional and alternative certification programs differ in effectiveness, with some studies suggesting traditionally trained teachers demonstrate stronger instructional and classroom management skills (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Miller et al., 1998; Nougaret et al., 2005). Scholars advocate integrating general and special education preparation programs to strengthen co-teaching, behavior management, and differentiated instruction skills (Quigney, 2010). Practical experiences, mentorship, and evidence-based training are also essential in improving teacher readiness (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Livers et al., 2021; Finkelstein et al., 2021).

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Inclusive Education for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Globally, inclusive education has become a major educational priority aimed at ensuring equal access to quality education for learners with disabilities. International policies and frameworks support evidence-based instructional practices and equitable participation for all students. The increasing number of learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms worldwide has intensified the demand for teacher preparedness and inclusive pedagogies. Nationally, the Philippines has institutionalized inclusive education through Republic Act No. 7277, Republic Act No. 9442, Republic Act No. 11650, and DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009. These policies mandate educational access, accommodations, and support systems for learners with disabilities. Despite these efforts, implementation challenges persist due to limited resources, insufficient teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate collaboration among stakeholders. Locally, limited studies have examined stakeholder support and teacher experiences in inclusive education within the Division of Santiago City. Existing gaps in localized research reduce the availability of context-specific strategies that could assist educators in effectively

supporting learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms. This study therefore addresses the need for localized evidence that may guide teachers, school leaders, and policymakers in improving inclusive education practices.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Basis of Stakeholder Support and Teacher Experiences in Integrating Learners with ASD

This study is anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which explains that human development is influenced by interactions within multiple environmental systems. In the context of inclusive education, the microsystem includes teacher-student interactions and peer relationships within classrooms. The mesosystem involves collaboration among parents, teachers, and administrators. The exosystem includes educational policies and support services, while the macrosystem reflects broader societal attitudes toward disability and inclusion. The chronosystem accounts for changes in educational policies and social perspectives over time. The conceptual framework of the study focuses on classroom strategies, teacher challenges, stakeholder support systems, and the development of a proposed plan of action for improving inclusion practices. The framework identifies teacher self-preparedness, instructional strategies, instructional materials, assessment practices, parental support, administrative support, and government support as essential components influencing successful integration of learners with ASD into mainstream classrooms.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale on Stakeholder Support to Inclusive Education in Primary Classrooms

Although literature strongly supports inclusive education and evidence-based instructional practices, several gaps remain. Existing studies often focus on general stakeholder perspectives while overlooking teachers as primary implementers of inclusion. There is also limited localized research examining teacher experiences and stakeholder support in Philippine elementary schools, particularly within Santiago City. Furthermore, the gap between inclusive education policies and actual classroom implementation remains insufficiently explored. Many teachers continue to report inadequate preparation, limited practical training, insufficient instructional materials, and lack of collaborative support. Research also highlights the disconnect between teacher education programs and real classroom demands, especially regarding inclusive pedagogy and co-teaching practices (Bledsoe et al., 2016; Cook & Cook, 2013; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Ricci et al., 2017; Schles & Robertson, 2019; Zagona et al., 2017). This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring stakeholder support for inclusive education through the experiences of elementary teachers handling learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms. The findings may contribute to policy improvement, teacher development programs, and stronger support systems for inclusive education.

1.6 Alignment of Stakeholder Support and Inclusive Education for Learners with ASD with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The study aligns primarily with SDG 4 – Quality Education, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. By examining the experiences of teachers and stakeholder support systems in integrating learners with ASD into mainstream classrooms, the study contributes to improving access, participation, and learning outcomes for students with disabilities. The research also relates to SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities by advocating equitable educational opportunities for learners with autism and addressing barriers that hinder inclusion. Furthermore, the study supports SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals through its emphasis on collaboration among teachers, parents, administrators, government agencies, and community stakeholders in strengthening inclusive education practices.

1.7 Importance of Stakeholder Support to Inclusive Education for Multidisciplinary Sustainability and Educational Development

The study contributes to socio-economic sustainability by promoting equitable educational opportunities that enable learners with ASD to develop academic and social skills necessary for meaningful participation in society. Strengthening inclusive education also supports community sustainability by fostering acceptance, diversity, and social inclusion within schools and local communities. In terms of educational sustainability, the study highlights the need for continuous teacher development, evidence-based instructional practices, and long-term institutional support systems that improve the quality of inclusive education. The findings may guide policymakers, educational leaders, and institutions in designing sustainable teacher preparation programs and inclusive policies. The study further contributes to institutional and policy sustainability by generating localized evidence that may support improvements in inclusive education implementation, stakeholder collaboration, and resource allocation. By strengthening support systems for teachers and learners with ASD, the research promotes more inclusive, effective, and sustainable educational environments.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology using a descriptive phenomenological approach to examine and interpret the lived experiences of elementary school teachers implementing inclusive education for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The study aimed to understand the instructional strategies used, challenges encountered, and accomplishments achieved by teachers integrating learners with autism into mainstream classrooms. The

phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it focuses on understanding personal experiences from the perspectives of individuals who directly experience the phenomenon (van Manen, 2017). This approach also emphasizes interpreting the meaning of these experiences within specific social and institutional contexts. The research was conducted during the School Year 2025–2026 in Santiago South Central School and Santiago North Central School in Santiago City, Isabela. These schools were selected because of their established inclusive education programs and continuous efforts to integrate learners with ASD into regular classrooms. Through interviews and observations, the study explored how teachers adapt instruction, respond to challenges, and experience inclusion in their daily teaching practices.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Division of Santiago City, located in the Cagayan Valley Region, specifically in Santiago South Central School and Santiago North Central School. These public elementary schools were selected due to their active implementation of inclusive education practices and compliance with Republic Act No. 11650 or the Inclusive Education Act of 2022. Both schools have designated Special Education (SPED) personnel and general education teachers handling learners diagnosed with ASD in mainstream classrooms. They also serve as pilot institutions for inclusive education practices within the division. The locale provided a suitable setting for examining the actual experiences, challenges, and successes of teachers implementing inclusive education in Philippine public elementary schools where diversity and resource limitations coexist.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were elementary school teachers from Santiago South Central School and Santiago North Central School in Santiago City, Isabela. These teachers were selected because they had direct experience teaching learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream classrooms. Their firsthand experiences in implementing inclusive instructional practices and adapting teaching methods provided valuable insights into inclusive education. The participants included general education teachers who were currently teaching or had previously taught students with ASD. Their experiences contributed to understanding the instructional challenges, coping strategies, professional needs, and realities of inclusive classroom implementation.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who possessed direct experience with the phenomenon being studied. This sampling technique is appropriate for descriptive phenomenological research because it intentionally identifies individuals who can provide meaningful and relevant information regarding inclusive education practices. The criteria for participant selection included: current or previous experience teaching at least one learner formally diagnosed with ASD in a mainstream classroom, willingness to participate in interviews and reflective discussions, and accessibility during the data gathering period. Approximately five to eight teachers were invited to participate, with considerations given to gender, teaching experience, and grade level to ensure diverse perspectives. The study aimed to obtain a contextualized understanding of inclusive education practices rather than generalize findings to all teachers.

2.5 Research Instrument

The study utilized questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and classroom observations to collect qualitative data and triangulate findings. Semi-structured interviews gathered detailed information regarding teachers' experiences, instructional strategies, and challenges in integrating learners with ASD into mainstream classrooms. Focus group discussions documented shared perspectives and collective experiences among teachers, while classroom observations used a systematic checklist to capture actual inclusive teaching practices and classroom interactions. The research instruments underwent content validation by five experts in the field of education using a four-point rating scale ranging from "Not Acceptable" to "Exceeds Expectations." The instruments were considered acceptable after most items received ratings of "Meets Expectations" or "Exceeds Expectations," along with revisions based on expert recommendations. Reliability testing produced a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process began with securing permission from the Schools Division Office of Santiago City and obtaining approval from the principals of Santiago North Central School and Santiago South Central School. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Isabela State University to ensure compliance with ethical research standards. Participants were provided with informed consent forms explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on teachers with experience handling learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Data were collected through classroom observations, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participant preference and availability, and each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Discussions focused on teachers' instructional strategies, challenges, preparedness, and experiences in inclusive education. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Focus group

discussions were conducted after individual interviews to gather shared insights and collective experiences. Non-participant classroom observations were also conducted using a researcher-made checklist to document differentiated instruction, classroom accommodations, visual supports, and teacher-student interactions involving learners with ASD. Each observation covered the duration of a class period to capture authentic classroom practices.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations were transcribed using Otter.ai. The transcripts were carefully reviewed and manually edited to ensure accuracy and consistency with participants' responses. Data analysis was conducted using Taguette, a qualitative data analysis software that supports systematic coding and theme identification. Thematic analysis was employed through open coding, categorization of similar concepts, and selective coding to identify core themes related to the research questions. Classroom observations were documented through detailed field notes to capture authentic inclusive teaching practices and teacher-student interactions involving learners with ASD. Data triangulation was used to strengthen the credibility and reliability of findings by comparing and integrating results from interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly observed ethical standards throughout the research process. All information gathered from participants was treated with confidentiality and used solely for the purposes of the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and withdrawn data would be excluded from analysis. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of Creswell and Poht (2018) and van Manen (2017), emphasizing respect, integrity, and participant welfare. Debriefing sessions and guidance counseling support were made available to participants who experienced emotional distress during the research process. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned codes ranging from Teacher A to Teacher H. Verbatim responses were preserved in italics to maintain authenticity and were analyzed alongside relevant literature.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Classroom Strategies Used in Integrating Learners with Autism into Mainstream Classrooms

3.1.1 Structured Routines and Predictable Learning Environment

Teachers consistently emphasized the use of structured routines and predictable classroom organization in supporting learners with autism. Participants explained that maintaining consistent lesson flow, stable activity sequences, predictable transitions, and organized seating arrangements reduced anxiety and confusion among learners with ASD. Teachers also highlighted that advance preparation before transitions helped learners remain emotionally regulated and engaged during lessons. These findings indicate that predictability functions as both behavioral and instructional support for learners with autism. Structured routines help learners focus on academic tasks rather than environmental uncertainty, resulting in improved engagement and emotional security. This aligns with Brown et al. (2019), who emphasized that structured environments improve participation and reduce behavioral disruptions among learners with autism. Similarly, Odom et al. (2011) explained that predictable classroom routines strengthen emotional stability and support effective learning.

3.1.2 Visual Supports and Step-by-Step Instruction

Teachers reported that learners with autism responded more effectively to visual supports and simplified step-by-step instruction. Participants used visual schedules, charts, pictures, written steps, demonstrations, and guided practice to help learners understand tasks more clearly. They also emphasized that breaking instructions into smaller parts reduced confusion and improved learner comprehension and participation. The findings suggest that visual and sequential instructional strategies reduce cognitive overload and enhance accessibility in inclusive classrooms. Visual supports function as concrete representations of abstract instructions, while guided modeling strengthens understanding through imitation and practice. These findings support Brown et al. (2019), who found that structured instructional breakdown improves learner engagement, and Tissot and Evans (2003), who emphasized that visual strategies improve comprehension and reduce anxiety among learners with autism.

3.1.3 Differentiated and Individualized Instruction

Teachers emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction in addressing the diverse learning needs of learners with autism. Participants explained that instructional strategies were adjusted according to learners' comprehension levels, attention span, communication abilities, and behavioral responses. Teachers also reported using continuous observation and immediate instructional modification to ensure understanding and participation. These findings demonstrate that differentiated instruction is an essential component of inclusive education. Teachers continuously adapt pacing, explanations, and teaching approaches to match learner needs, reflecting a learner-centered instructional process. This aligns with Ricci et al. (2017), who emphasized that differentiated instruction promotes equitable access to learning, and Brown et al. (2019), who highlighted that instructional flexibility improves engagement and achievement in inclusive settings.

3.1.4 Positive Reinforcement and Behavioral Support

Participants identified positive reinforcement and supportive behavioral management as important strategies in maintaining learner engagement. Teachers commonly used verbal praise, encouragement, redirection, rewards, and calm guidance to reinforce positive behavior and sustain participation among learners with autism. They also emphasized avoiding punitive discipline and instead focusing on emotional safety and behavioral support. The findings indicate that reinforcement-based strategies create supportive and motivating classroom environments for learners with autism. Positive feedback strengthens learner confidence, participation, and emotional regulation while reducing disruptive behaviors. These findings support Odom et al. (2011), who identified reinforcement strategies as highly effective in autism education. The use of gentle redirection further reflects child-centered and emotionally supportive teaching approaches within inclusive classrooms.

3.1.5 Visual Scheduling and Transition Management

Teachers consistently identified visual schedules and visual cues as effective tools for managing classroom transitions. Participants explained that visual schedules helped learners anticipate upcoming activities, reduce anxiety, and become more independent during classroom routines. Teachers also noted that learners demonstrated fewer emotional outbursts and behavioral disruptions when transitions were clearly presented visually. These findings suggest that visual scheduling supports emotional regulation, independence, and classroom stability among learners with autism. Predictable transitions reduce uncertainty and improve learner confidence in navigating classroom routines. This aligns with Tissot and Evans (2003), who emphasized that visual supports enhance behavioral regulation and comprehension. The findings also reflect Universal Design for Learning principles that advocate multiple forms of representation for diverse learners.

3.2 Challenges Encountered in Implementing Inclusive Practices for Learners with Autism

3.2.1 Teacher Self-Preparedness in Inclusive Education

Teachers reported that insufficient formal training was a major challenge in implementing inclusive education. Participants explained that pre-service education provided only general theoretical discussions on inclusion, leaving them unprepared for actual classroom realities such as behavioral management, communication barriers, and instructional modification for learners with autism. As a result, many teachers relied heavily on experience, colleague support, seminars, and self-directed learning to develop inclusive teaching skills. The findings reveal a significant gap between theoretical preparation and practical classroom implementation. Teachers develop competence gradually through experience rather than formal training, resulting in emotional strain, uncertainty, and increased workload during the early stages of inclusive teaching. These findings align with Forlin and Chambers (2011), who emphasized that many teachers feel inadequately prepared for inclusive education despite supporting its philosophy. Similarly, Chitiyo and Brinda (2018) stressed that teacher preparedness strongly influences instructional confidence and effectiveness in inclusive settings.

3.2.2 Challenges in Teaching Strategies and Instructional Delivery

Participants explained that teaching strategies in inclusive classrooms are highly unpredictable and require continuous adjustment. Teachers reported that strategies effective on one occasion may not work consistently due to learner behavior, attention variability, and emotional responses. They also highlighted difficulties balancing curriculum requirements with individualized pacing and meaningful learner understanding. These findings suggest that inclusive teaching requires constant instructional flexibility and real-time pedagogical decision-making. Teachers continuously modify lesson delivery, pacing, and instructional methods according to learner responses, increasing cognitive and emotional demands. This supports Brown et al. (2019), who emphasized that inclusive instruction significantly increases teacher workload and instructional complexity. Likewise, Ricci et al. (2017) noted that differentiated instruction requires ongoing adjustment due to learner variability in inclusive classrooms.

3.2.3 Limitations in Instructional Materials and Resources

Teachers identified insufficient instructional materials as a major challenge in implementing inclusive education. Participants explained that autism-specific resources, visual aids, and modified instructional materials were often unavailable, requiring teachers to create and customize materials independently. Teachers also emphasized that the preparation of individualized learning resources consumed significant time and effort. The findings indicate that limited instructional resources hinder effective inclusion and increase teacher workload. Teachers become responsible not only for instruction but also for developing autism-responsive materials. This aligns with Mueller et al. (2019), who identified inadequate resources as a persistent barrier in inclusive education, and Choi et al. (2017), who emphasized the importance of adapted and learner-centered materials in supporting diverse learners.

3.2.4 Challenges in Assessment Practices

Teachers consistently reported that traditional written assessments often fail to accurately measure the learning of learners with autism. Participants observed that learners may understand lessons but struggle to express understanding through written tests due to communication difficulties, motor coordination challenges, and differences in expression. As a result, teachers relied more on observation, performance-based assessment, participation, and behavioral indicators in evaluating learner progress. The findings reveal that standardized written assessments may not fully capture the actual competencies

of learners with autism. Alternative assessments such as observation and performance tasks provide more authentic evaluation of learning but also require careful interpretation and consistency. These findings support Elleman and Oslund (2019), who emphasized the need for flexible and responsive assessment systems in inclusive education, and Ricci et al. (2017), who advocated for multiple assessment approaches to address learner diversity.

3.3 Stakeholder Support for Inclusive Education

3.3.1 Parental Support and Home-School Collaboration

Teachers emphasized that parental involvement significantly influences the success of inclusive education. Participants reported that learners with autism showed improved behavioral consistency, participation, and academic progress when parents actively reinforced classroom strategies at home. However, teachers also noted differences in parental awareness and capacity, with some parents lacking sufficient understanding of autism and inclusive practices. The findings indicate that home-school collaboration strengthens the effectiveness of inclusive interventions. Consistency between school and home environments supports learner development and behavior management. These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which emphasizes the influence of interactions between home and school environments on child development. However, inconsistent parental involvement highlights the need for parental orientation and training programs.

3.3.2 Administrative Support and Institutional Assistance

Participants acknowledged that school administrators support inclusive education through policy implementation, professional development opportunities, and resource facilitation. Teachers reported receiving encouragement to attend training programs and implement inclusive practices. However, they also emphasized limitations in resources, time, and sustained institutional support. These findings suggest that administrative support is essential but constrained by institutional limitations. While administrators encourage inclusive practices, insufficient resources and lack of structured support systems affect implementation consistency. This aligns with Custodio (2025), who highlighted the gap between inclusive education policies and actual school implementation. The findings further indicate the need for stronger monitoring systems, resource allocation, and sustained professional development for teachers.

3.3.3 Government Support and Policy Implementation

Teachers recognized that government policies strongly promote inclusive education through Department of Education directives and programs. However, participants also emphasized that practical support in terms of training, manpower, instructional materials, and classroom resources remains inadequate. Teachers further noted that access to government-led training programs was inconsistent and not equally available to all educators. The findings reveal that government support for inclusive education is largely policy-driven but operationally limited. While policies establish a framework for inclusion, schools continue to face shortages in resources, personnel, and specialized training. These findings support Kaushik (2025), who emphasized that inclusive education requires sustained operational and financial support beyond policy mandates. Similarly, Beltran et al. (2025) highlighted that implementation gaps remain a major challenge in the Philippine inclusive education system.

3.4 Proposed Action Plan for Strengthening Inclusive Education

The study proposed the CARES: Classroom Approaches for Responsive and Effective Support in Enhancing Teachers' Capacity for Autism Inclusion in Mainstream Classrooms action plan to address the identified challenges in teacher preparedness, instructional strategies, assessment practices, and stakeholder support. The action plan includes regular training programs, coaching sessions, differentiated instruction strategies, development of autism-responsive instructional materials, alternative assessment methods, parent orientation programs, strengthened school-based support systems, and coordination with government agencies for additional resources and training opportunities. The proposed action plan reflects a collaborative and systematic approach to inclusive education. It emphasizes that successful inclusion requires the combined efforts of teachers, parents, administrators, and government institutions. The plan also promotes continuous professional development, learner-centered instruction, equitable assessment, and stronger institutional support systems. Through sustained implementation, the action plan is expected to improve teacher competence, learner engagement, and inclusive educational opportunities for learners with autism in mainstream classrooms.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study revealed that teachers use various inclusive strategies such as individualized instruction, differentiated teaching approaches, visual supports, observational methods, and performance-based assessments to integrate learners with autism into mainstream classrooms. However, these practices are often developed through personal experience rather than formal training. Teachers encounter major challenges related to limited self-preparedness, insufficient professional development, lack of specialized instructional materials, and difficulties in implementing appropriate assessment methods for learners with autism. The findings further showed that stakeholder support from parents, school administrators, and government institutions plays a significant role in improving inclusive education, although such support remains inconsistent due to

limitations in resources, training, manpower, and structured programs. Overall, the study concludes that inclusive education for learners with autism requires a collaborative and systematic approach that strengthens teacher capacity, instructional support, assessment practices, and stakeholder coordination to ensure effective implementation in mainstream classrooms.

Schools may implement the proposed action plan to strengthen teachers' competencies and improve inclusive education practices for learners with autism. Continuous professional development programs focusing on autism awareness, differentiated instruction, behavior management, and inclusive instructional delivery may be provided to teachers. Schools and educational institutions may allocate appropriate instructional resources such as visual aids, assistive tools, and modified learning materials, while also adopting flexible assessment approaches including performance-based tasks, observation, and portfolio assessment. Stakeholders, including parents, administrators, and government agencies, may strengthen collaboration through sustained communication, training programs, mentoring systems, monitoring mechanisms, increased resource allocation, and deployment of additional personnel to support inclusive education. Future researchers may also conduct further studies on the long-term impact of inclusive education interventions, effectiveness of specific teaching strategies and assessment tools, and replication of the study in different educational settings to strengthen the findings and improve generalizability.

The study was limited to elementary teachers from Santiago North Central School and Santiago South Central School in the Division of Santiago City during the School Year 2025–2026. The participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted only of teachers who had experience handling learners with autism in mainstream classrooms. The study focused primarily on teachers' experiences regarding instructional strategies, assessment practices, stakeholder support, and challenges in inclusive education. It did not quantitatively measure the academic performance of learners with autism nor generalize findings to all schools in the Philippines. In addition, the study relied on qualitative data gathered through interviews, observations, and discussions, which may involve subjective interpretation of participant experiences.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study strictly observed ethical standards throughout the research process. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection. All information gathered from participants was treated with confidentiality and used solely for the purposes of the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The study emphasized respect, integrity, and participant welfare throughout the conduct of the research. Debriefing sessions and guidance counseling support were made available to participants who experienced emotional distress during the research process. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned codes ranging from Teacher A to Teacher H, and verbatim responses were preserved to maintain authenticity.

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