

Bridging the Competence Gap: Pedagogical Adaptations of Elementary Teachers in Indonesian Inclusive Classrooms

Herlina Febriyani¹, Suyatno Suyatno^{2,*}, & Lukis Alam³

¹Department of Educational Management, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia

²Department of Education Science, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia

³Urban and Regional Planning Department, Institut Teknologi Nasional Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding email: syatno@pgsd.uad.ac.id

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Abstract: One of the key indicators of success in the inclusive education process is the response of teachers and its principles. This response is influenced by various factors, such as educational background, experience working with children with special needs, self-confidence in conducting educational activities, and the difficulty level of the children. Therefore, this study aimed to explore teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive practices and adapting pedagogical strategies when teaching children with special needs in elementary schools in a rural area of Indonesia, specifically in the Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach, and data were collected through interviews with 10 elementary school teachers from different schools. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes emerging from teachers' experiences. They had varying ages, educational backgrounds, and teaching experience. The results showed that teachers initially felt confused, tense, and worried about their ability to guide inclusive students. This condition was followed by pressure and diverse student attitudes, which increased stress, sadness, and a desire to give up. However, teachers felt challenged and realized that every child is special, unique, and entitled to receive appropriate educational services. Through reflective practice and collaboration with colleagues, teachers began to develop adaptive strategies, such as differentiated instruction, emotional regulation, and individualized learning support. This study emphasizes that inclusive education in rural areas requires not only emotional readiness but also systemic support for teachers in building confidence and competence to serve diverse learners.

Keywords: children with special needs, experience of teachers, inclusive school, phenomenological.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Several issues are left unresolved due to the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia (Fitra et al., 2023). This has led to several challenges within the school environment (Chairunnisa & Rismita, 2022), such as parental or community resistance, violence and harassment against children with special needs, a shortage of competent special education teachers, adaptability to the curriculum, and suboptimal learning (Nilholm, 2021). The need for improved teacher quality in managing inclusive classrooms (Ningsih & Suyatno, 2023) has not been matched by the realities in the field. Strategies used to

optimize the potential of inclusive students at school are hindered by the quality and competence of teachers who lack a special education background (EB) (Warman, 2021) and limited training (Bertills et al., 2019).

One of the key indicators of success in the inclusive education process is teachers' response to inclusive education and its principles. This is influenced by various factors, including their educational background, experience working with children with special needs, self-confidence in their ability to conduct educational activities, and the difficulty level (Kefallinou et al., 2020). Teaching experience in the classroom, as one

factor influencing teachers' attitudes, cannot be ignored. Through teaching experience, teachers can more easily prepare effective and efficient classrooms (Connor & Cavendish, 2020). Furthermore, teachers are challenged by their own beliefs and expectations, as well as systemic barriers. These beliefs can only be positively changed when teachers are allowed to engage in inclusive practices (Somma, 2020).

The study by Podolsky et al. (2019) showed that teaching experience does not automatically lead to improvement, nor does it necessarily transform an incompetent teacher into an effective one. For the majority, experience enhances their effectiveness in classroom management. This result is consistent with the report by Supriyanto (2019), which found no significant influence of teachers' experience on their attitude toward inclusive education. On the other hand, Wilson et al. (2020) found that teachers' experience increases their self-confidence in dealing with inclusive classrooms. Wray et al. (2022) concluded that teaching experience in inclusive classrooms boosts confidence and positively impacts students. These contrasting findings indicate that the relationship between teaching experience and inclusive attitudes is complex and context-dependent. Differences may arise from cultural expectations, school resources, or teachers' emotional and reflective engagement with inclusion (Emam et al., 2025). However, previous studies have not explored how teachers themselves make sense of their inclusive teaching experiences within everyday classroom realities. This reveals a gap in the literature concerning the phenomenological understanding of teachers' lived experiences in inclusive settings. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge these inconsistencies by exploring how teachers in Indonesian elementary schools interpret and give meaning to their experiences when teaching children with special needs. Rather than merely identifying challenges or listing emotions, this study aims to uncover the essence

of teachers' lived experiences and how these experiences shape their understanding, beliefs, and pedagogical practices in inclusive classrooms.

This study aims to describe the personal experience of teachers who teach in inclusive classrooms. It focused on how the challenges teachers have encountered have contributed to changes in their attitudes and to the development of strategies to optimize the potential of individual inclusive students. Furthermore, the study examines the (1) how teachers perceive and construct the meaning of their teaching experience with children with special needs. (2) How do emotional and psychological dynamics influence teachers' understanding of inclusion? (3) In what ways do teachers transform challenges into reflective learning and pedagogical growth within inclusive settings? These responses will be further explored using a phenomenological method to elucidate the meaning and significance of these experiences as a form of learning for teachers, schools, and policymakers.

■ **METHOD**

Research Design and Procedures

This study is qualitative and uses a phenomenological method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach seeks to understand and describe phenomena as experienced by individuals without prejudice, prior assumptions, or personal interpretation. Phenomenology focuses on uncovering the fundamental structure and meaning of subjective human experiences, and on explaining how humans interact with their surroundings (Neubauer et al., 2019). In this context, the present study aimed to uncover the essence of the lived experiences of elementary school teachers in teaching children with special needs, that is, the shared meaning emerging from their direct experiences. The study adopted a descriptive phenomenological analysis (Webb & Welsh, 2019) because this method is considered most suitable for systematically and in-depth exploring teachers' subjective experiences. This

choice was made to ensure philosophical and methodological coherence between Husserl's foundational perspective and the empirical-analytical procedures of data interpretation.

This study is conducted in 5 stages using the phenomenological method of Husserl, namely: (1) *Epoche* (bracketing): temporarily suspending all personal beliefs, assumptions, or opinions and methoding a phenomenon with an open mind, free from prejudice, which was carried out by recording the researcher's initial assumptions in a reflective journal before the data collection process began. (2) *Description of Phenomena*: records experience, feelings, meanings, and structures that arise when an individual experiences something to gain a deep understanding of its essence, which is implemented by writing a detailed description of the results of in-depth interviews without initial interpretation. (3) *Intentionality*: identifies the direction or orientation toward the study object to understand the meaning or relationships that are constructed, which is done by tracing the focus of attention and meaning of participants in each part of their narrative. (4) *Phenomenological Reduction*: focuses on the core of experience and disregards external, cultural, or historical aspects that might influence subjective perspective, which is carried out by reviewing the transcript to separate statements that directly describe the experience from opinions or additional, non-essential explanations. (5) *Categorical Description*: describes and classifies essential categories that arise in subjective experience, which is applied by compiling core themes from participant descriptions and grouping similarities and variations in experiences between participants. This helps understand the similarities and

differences in individual experience (Husserl, 2017).

To obtain information about teachers' experiences in teaching children with special needs, this study follows the steps of Streubert and Carpenter (2011), based on the phenomenological structure developed by Spiegelberg (1976). These steps include: identifying and transforming the phenomenon to be studied into a pure and complete representation; conducting a literature review to position the results in the context of previous studies; maintaining the truth of the study to ensure the validity and reliability of the data; and observing ethical considerations to ensure the confidentiality of study informants at all stages, including transcription, description, and data presentation, as well as obtaining voluntary consent for recording the interview process.

Participants

Data collection was conducted using purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in phenomenological studies, in which individuals with relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation are eligible to participate (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). The participants included 10 elementary school teachers from Bengkalis Regency with experience teaching students with special needs. These participants comprised class, subject, and special education teachers.

Instruments

Interviews were conducted using several direct questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and confirmed via short message communication. The study instrument is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Study Instrument

| Phenomenon Studied | Indicators | Instrument items |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Experience of teachers in | 1. Motivation and the influence of teaching | 1. The teacher's motivation to support diverse learners in an inclusive classroom |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| optimizing the individual potential of inclusive | experience in inclusive classrooms | 2. The extent to which previous teaching experiences influence the teacher's strategies |
| | 2. Emotional and psychological dynamics of teachers in the learning process | 3. The emotional responses teachers experience when handling diverse learning needs |
| | 3. Efforts to find solutions to the challenges faced | 4. The psychological challenges teachers encounter and how these affect their instructional decisions |
| | | 5. The strategies teachers employ to overcome instructional and behavioral challenges in inclusive settings |
| | | 6. The teacher's efforts to collaborate with parents, specialists, or colleagues to support inclusive learning needs |

Data Analysis

Data treatment and analysis included repeatedly reading transcripts to become immersed in the data, extracting specific statements, formulating meanings, developing themes and clusters, formulating comprehensive descriptions of the phenomena, and validating by making provision for the participants (Colaizzi, 1978).

adapting pedagogical strategies when teaching children with special needs. The results of the data analysis showed three important themes in this study: motivation for teaching experience, the emotional and psychological dynamics of teachers, and the search for solutions: delving into the world of children with special needs. The results of the data analysis are presented in Table 2.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research aimed to explore teachers' experiences implementing inclusive practices and

Motivation for Teaching Experience

This study explored teachers' experiences optimizing the potential of inclusive students at

Table 2. Data analysis results

| Parti- cants | Codes | Subthemes | Theme |
|-------------------|--|---|---|
| P1, P5, P6 | "Headache... violent, bite, chase... I'm bewildered."; "Surprised... giving up... not my field."; "Confused... no knowledge... suddenly aggressive." | Negative initial attitude; Lack of inclusive background; Mixed emotions; Confusion due to no special-education training | Motivation and the influence of teaching experience |
| P4, P7 | "Initially tense because each child has different characteristics"; "Happy... equal education for all." | Positive initial attitude; Inclusive belief; Intrinsic motivation | |
| P1, P3, P8, P9 | Confusion; headaches; challenges with autistic students; difficulty with learning difficulties | Confusion & Uncertainty; Emotional overload; Pressure from student behaviors | Emotional and psychological dynamics of teachers |
| P2 | Sadness; fear; fatigue; tantrums from students | Fear-sadness-vulnerability; Stress; Emotional exhaustion | |

| | | | |
|------------|---|--|---|
| P4, P6 | Tantrums; crying; vomiting; sudden emotional disruptions | Pressure from student behaviors; Stress & shock | |
| P5, P10 | Shock, desire to give up, mixed emotions, disruptions from intellectually disabled students | Shock & surprise; Motivation collapse; Stress & emotional overload | |
| P7 | Challenges with low-IQ students | Pressure from student behaviors | |
| P1, P2 | Repeated explanations; observing mood; learning patience; clear instructions; positivity | Identifying needs; Emotional attunement; Clear instructional strategy, and positive reinforcement. | Delving into the world of children with special needs |
| P3, P5, P6 | Adjusting instruction, identifying difficulties, observing abilities, and seat arrangement. | Adjustment of approach; Diagnostic strategies; Classroom structuring | |
| P4, P8 | Hugs, emotional comfort, storytelling, and providing leisure time | Emotional support strategies; Story-based engagement; Emotional management | |
| P9 | Clear articulation; visual aids; building comfort; creating materials | Multimodal instruction; Classroom atmosphere management | |
| P10 | Games, frequent communication, task assistance, and identifying fears | Engaging methods; Motivational strategies; Individualized support | |
| P7 | Systemic critique; lack of government support | Critical reflection; Awareness of systemic needs | |

the elementary school level. Although the study was conducted on teachers from different schools, the results showed similar experiences. The 3 indicators showed that teaching experience and educational background significantly influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education. This is consistent with the results of Podolsky et al. (2019), Somma (2020), Supriyanto (2019), Wilson et al. (2020), and Wray et al. (2022).

Teaching in inclusive classrooms is a highly motivating and meaningful experience. When this path is chosen, teachers demonstrate their understanding that every child has unique potential and deserves an education tailored to their needs. However, it is undeniable that teachers' motivation to teach in inclusive classrooms is influenced by their initial expectations. This inclination further develops as they gain more experience working with children with special needs.

Exploring teachers' initial attitudes toward children with special needs can be categorized

into 2 clusters based on educational background. Teachers with special EB A exhibit a more positive response than those without it (EB B). This is evident in P4's statement: "...initially, it was tense because each child has different characteristics and behaviors, making their handling different." A more positive attitude is shown by P7, who expresses pleasure with this experience. According to P7:

The contentment arises from the principle of equal education, asserting the entitlement of all individuals, including children with special needs. It allows children who live far from the city to receive a proper education in a formal school, as Special Education Schools are usually located in towns or regencies.

Meanwhile, different responses are observed from teachers in the EB B cluster. Teachers without a background in inclusive education exhibit varied responses. Some of the experience described by the response of P1:

To be honest, it gives me a headache. Because the children I deal with can become violent, bite, and chase their friends. Since I do not have a background in special education, I am left bewildered in dealing with them.

P5 also said: “Surprised, feeling like giving up because it is not my field, but I have to make an effort to keep the students motivated to learn.”

This is reinforced by P6: Feeling confused about how to handle it because we do not have the knowledge to deal with inclusive students, specifically those who suddenly become aggressive, like autistic children, who all quite suddenly become emotional.

Based on the teachers’ experiences, it is evident that teaching in inclusive classrooms demands commitment and patience. However, the satisfaction gained from this experience far outweighs the challenges faced. Teachers’ competence and attitude toward inclusive education significantly affect their willingness and ability to implement inclusive practices, as reported by Cate et al. (2018) and Putri & Ain (2022). Teachers’ motivation to teach in inclusive classrooms stems from the belief that every child is valuable and entitled to a proper education (Nilholm, 2021). Teachers should commit to continually supporting their students’ development to help them achieve their full potential in life.

Teaching experience in inclusive classrooms is characterized by unique emotional and psychological dynamics. Teachers working in inclusive environments experience a range of emotions and challenges that significantly affect their psychological well-being. Some challenging moments test teachers’ skills and resilience, thereby affecting their motivation to teach. The accumulation of emotional dynamics includes confusion, sadness, fear, headaches, anger, surprise, fatigue, and a desire to give up. These emotional dynamics are closely related to teachers’ initial

expectations, their limited experience (Connor & Cavendish, 2020), and the pressure of working with inclusive students (Supriyanto, 2019). This can be explained by the likelihood of encountering potential social frictions in the initial interaction between individuals from 2 different backgrounds (Persson, 2022). On the other hand, there are moments of joy that radiate pride and satisfaction when observing the development of children with various special needs. The contributions of teachers in ensuring equal education, providing opportunities for optimal growth, and building empathy and connections across backgrounds, abilities, and differences bring personal happiness and satisfaction (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Muñoz Martínez et al., 2024; Romanovska & Novak, 2024). Witnessing progress in inclusive classrooms and watching children overcome potential obstacles is a tremendous source of personal satisfaction and motivation. Witnessing the gleam of excitement in children’s eyes when they achieve something new compels teachers to keep giving their best. This experience reinforces the assumption that positive emotions are transmitted between teachers and students (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021).

Emotional and Psychological Dynamics of Teachers

Teaching in inclusive classrooms is filled with unique emotional and psychological dynamics. The accumulation of these emotional dynamics includes feelings of confusion by P1, P3, P6, P8, P9, and P10, as well as sadness (P2), fear (P2), headaches (P1), anger (P1), surprise (P5, P10), fatigue (P2), and a desire to give up (P5). These emotional dynamics cannot be separated from initial expectations and a lack of prior experience working with inclusive students. It also includes the pressures of dealing with inclusive students, as expressed by P3:

It is like confusion, specifically in the classroom, where the categories are diverse and inclusive, and with children present. I also lack adequate knowledge regarding the characteristics of effective teaching within an inclusive classroom setting. Therefore, I do what I can, and the important thing is to keep the class comfortable. P6 expresses a similar sentiment:

I feel confused about how to deal with it because we do not have the knowledge to handle inclusive children, specifically those who suddenly become agitated, such as autistic children. It is all quite sudden; therefore, I focus on maintaining a safe and comfortable environment for everyone.

In other words, both P5 and P10 expressed surprise. P5 mentioned: “Surprised, feeling like giving up because it is not my field, but I have to make an effort to keep the students motivated to learn.”

It is a mixed feeling, leaning more toward surprise and confusion. Being in an inclusive classroom is confusing, especially when trying to help all students understand my lessons. We are not from the special education field. They surely need special guidance to understand the material I teach.

The findings revealed that teaching in inclusive classrooms triggered a range of emotional and psychological responses among teachers. Feelings of confusion, fear, sadness, fatigue, anger, and even the desire to give up were common emotional experiences reported by participants (Schorr & Goldner, 2023). These emotional dynamics were largely influenced by teachers’ lack of prior experience and limited knowledge in handling students with diverse needs. This emotional complexity reflects how inclusive education not only tests teachers’ pedagogical competence but also their emotional endurance and adaptability (Salinas-Falquez et al., 2022; Tong, 2025).

In another form, teachers’ emotional expressions also include sadness, anger, fatigue, and a desire to give up. P2 confessed:

I feel sad and afraid because I cannot guide and lead the students in their learning. There is also a sense of fatigue because I have to put in extra effort to teach students from different categories in one class. On the other hand, P1 reached a state of anger:

For impressions, it is a bit tricky. Sometimes, when you see inclusive children in the middle of a tantrum, it can be funny to watch. However, I want to emphasize that it is nice to teach or deal with inclusive children when communication with their parents is good.

There was even the desire to give up, as expressed by P5: “Surprised, felt like giving up because it is not my field, but I have to make an effort to keep the students motivated to learn.”

Teachers’ confusion and anxiety, as expressed by several participants, stemmed from the uncertainty of managing students with different learning and behavioral characteristics. Consistent with findings by Forlin (2010) and Sharma & Sokal (2016), insufficient preparation and inadequate training in inclusive practices often lead to emotional exhaustion and self-doubt. The participants’ expressions of surprise and fear highlight their struggle to reconcile their expectations of teaching with the reality of inclusive classrooms. These emotions demonstrate that inclusive teaching is not simply a cognitive task but also an affective process involving emotional negotiation and resilience (Faria & Camargo, 2025; Li et al., 2020).

The emergence of sadness, anger, and fatigue indicates that emotional regulation has become a critical challenge for teachers. In line with Horner et al. (2020) and Lee & Van Vlack (2018), the concept of emotional labor in teaching, the participants’ experiences illustrate how emotional management is central to sustaining

engagement and empathy in complex classroom contexts. Teachers' feelings of fatigue and frustration often arose when they faced unpredictable behaviors such as tantrums, mood swings, or classroom disruptions (Park & Ramirez, 2022; Rubbi Nunan & Ntombela, 2022). However, despite these challenges, several teachers displayed persistence and empathy, suggesting that emotional awareness may serve as the foundation for developing inclusive teaching competence.

Meanwhile, the emotional conditions that arise in dealing with the pressure from inclusive students are diverse. For some teachers, including P1, P3, P4, P6, and P9, facing autistic children is the most challenging experience. This is followed by children with learning difficulties (P2, P5, P8), with low IQ (P7), and with intellectual disabilities (P10). The challenges they face include being in a bad mood (P1), tantrums (P2, P4, P6), and minor mischievous behaviors, such as walking around the classroom and disrupting their classmates' concentration (P10). P1 expressed some examples:

The most challenging thing for children with special needs is when they are in a bad mood and get disturbed by their peers. Therefore, I first check the condition of children with special needs, whether they are in a bad mood or not, before starting the lesson. This is because when they are in a bad mood, they do not want to write, sometimes even shout in class. Additionally, P6 also mentioned:

The challenge I have faced with children with special needs is when they suddenly cry and scream, sometimes even vomit. I try not to panic and overcome the feeling of nausea when I see children throwing up.

In the psychological dynamics, teachers in inclusive classrooms need to strike a good balance between empathy and professionalism. They should also manage frustration when lesson plans do not go as expected, while remaining focused on students' best interests and ensuring

a sense of support and acceptance (Park & Ramirez, 2022). Furthermore, teachers need to develop confidence in their ability to address various challenges in inclusive classrooms (Wilson et al., 2020; Woodcock et al., 2022). Specialized training (Somma, 2020), collaboration with support staff, and assistance from colleagues (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017) can help teachers cope with uncertainty and feel better prepared to face these dynamic days.

The emotional experiences described by the teachers underscore the importance of institutional and collegial support. The lack of systematic mentoring and psychological assistance appears to intensify teachers' feelings of isolation and helplessness. As emphasized by Adams et al. (2023) and Francisco et al. (2020), inclusive education requires not only curriculum adjustments but also emotional and organizational readiness from teachers and schools. The findings thus point to the need for structured professional development programs that include emotional resilience training and opportunities for collaborative reflection.

In a broader sense, these emotional and psychological dynamics indicate that inclusive education in Indonesia remains in a transitional phase (Andriana & Evans, 2021; Syafii et al., 2025). Teachers are negotiating between professional responsibility and emotional vulnerability. This study indicates that building inclusive competence must go hand in hand with strengthening teachers' emotional intelligence and psychological well-being (Calandri et al., 2025; Pozo-Rico et al., 2020). Therefore, emotional resilience should be recognized as a core dimension of teacher professionalism in inclusive contexts, rather than as an individual struggle to be managed alone.

Search for Solutions: Delving into the World of Children with Special Needs

When teachers enter inclusive classrooms, they recognize that their role extends beyond

educator to companion, curious explorer, and motivator. Teachers would immerse themselves in the world of these children with compassion and understanding. Since education is not just about teaching but also about learning, teachers should learn to listen, read their students' facial expressions, and create a friendly, supportive environment.

Teachers make these efforts through learning from experience and continuously exploring their potential. Those with special EB A usually have specific teaching strategies when dealing with inclusive students. However, teachers without special EB B initially tend to apply the same technique to inclusive students as they do to others (P3, P5). Their strategies and methods develop as they gain experience and knowledge. This is evident in the responses of EXP B teachers, who exhibit a higher degree of deliberate preparation and strategies than those in EXP A. In this regard, P5 mentions:

At the beginning of working with inclusive students, I had difficulty because I had been providing the same instruction and assessments as I did for other students. However, after understanding the situation of inclusive students, I stopped treating them like other children and instead provided tasks based on what they could do and complete.

In the context of strategies, it is evident that teachers engaged in the following activities (1) identifying the difficulties of children (P5, P6), (2) observing their abilities (P5, P6), (3) arranging seating (P6), (4) providing repeated explanations (P1, P2), (5) using clear articulation (P9), (6) creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere (P9), (7) making teaching materials (P9), (8) using games (P10), and (9) assisting in completing tasks (P10). This can be seen in a more detailed form in the statement P5 as follows:

I identify the difficulties that the students face. I invite them to tell me about it first, and then I begin observing their abilities, whether

by asking them to read a text or to spell out letters. This is consistent with the statement of P6:

I first understand the class situation and explain it to the students to help them understand and appreciate diversity. I adjust the seating groups and group members for each student. On the other hand, P9 provided insight:

When giving instructions, I use clear articulation, conduct communication exercises, create a comfortable classroom atmosphere for children, and provide visual aids to facilitate understanding. P10 supplemented this:

Based on my experience, an effective strategy is to provide motivation and special treatment, such as frequent communication, assigning tasks in the form of games, and helping slow-learning, inclusive children to complete their tasks at school.

In terms of teaching strategies, teachers tend to instill positivity (P2, P10), provide clear and repetitive instructions (P2), offer hugs (P4), encourage storytelling (P4, P5, P10), and provide leisure time (P8). This is evident in the statement of P2:

It can be conducted by instilling positive things and giving clear instructions. They should be repeated and consistent. Similarly, P10 stated:

Based on my experience teaching inclusive children, an effective strategy is to provide motivation and special treatment, such as frequent communication, assigning tasks in game-based formats, and helping slow-learning children complete their schoolwork.

Based on the descriptions above, it is evident that building empathy is the key to delving into the world of children with special needs. Furthermore, teachers need to understand what they feel. Their emotions, such as genuine happiness and deep frustration, become part of the process that teachers need to observe. Their motivation to overcome challenges is illustrated

by their ability to problem-solve, think creatively, and achieve set goals.

In the effort to find solutions, this study describes the efforts of teachers despite their limitations to include companionship, a cultivator of curiosity, and a motivator. Teachers need to be immersed in these children's world with compassion and understanding. This aspect is supported by the efforts to develop strategies and methods in the learning process. The efforts are inseparable from the challenges of competence, attitude, motivation, and strategy in dealing with inclusive students (Wong & Mohd Rashid, 2022). Furthermore, placing students with special needs in inclusive classrooms can be problematic without serious classroom management. According to Dell'Anna et al. (2021), inclusive classrooms can have both positive and negative effects on students. The methods and learning processes for inclusive students vary and demand innovation from teachers (Bertills et al., 2019). Given the diversity of needs among inclusive children, implementation in the field requires modification according to students' needs (Baum et al., 2021). This situation leads teachers to develop learning materials tailored to students' needs.

Changes in teachers' attitudes toward inclusive children appear to show a positive trend following teaching in inclusive classrooms. Although teachers still experience high levels of emotions and stress, they eventually learn from inclusive students that every child is unique and special. This is exemplified in the statement of P1:

For the impression, it is complicated. Sometimes I get emotional when children have tantrums, and sometimes it is amusing to watch. But I emphasize that it is nice to teach or handle these inclusive children when there is good communication with their parents. As a teacher, I also learned patience from them and understand different mental conditions in

children and parents. P4 shared another perspective:

Alhamdulillah, I am very happy because I learned how inclusive children are and how they follow the lessons of those who are normal. Similarly, I learned how children with special needs compete in learning alongside their peers. I have many impressions when facing these inclusive children. Their learning is characterized by a consistent method, driven by the principle of emulating their peers. This is consistent with the statement of P10:

My impression when teaching inclusive children is that they are unique and sometimes do funny things. The majority find it difficult to concentrate due to differences in their intellectual abilities. They prefer their own world and sometimes want to disturb their peers' studying. What is most impressive is that every inclusive child (specifically, one with an intellectual disability) usually has someone they fear among their friends. On the other hand, P7 offered a critical note:

It is both fun and challenging because in Riau, inclusive education for children is not yet well developed, and the government appears half-hearted. Many teachers still need to improve their knowledge about children with special needs and inclusion.

This study shows that teachers' efforts are moving in a positive direction. Although teachers without special EB may initially appear confused and even struggle to align their teaching strategies, they begin to realize the need for specialized methods over time. The screening and assessment process reflects the steps taken by teachers, such as recognizing students' difficulties (Nugroho & Minsih, 2021; Xu & Kuti, 2021). Similarly, personalized strategies for students (Thompson et al., 2018) aim to address individual needs, while arranging student seating facilitates socialization with peers (Peremitin, 2019). Creating study groups typically allows students

who are typically developing to support inclusive learners in their studies. Developing enjoyable learning materials (Denico, 2020; Stefani & Samsiyah, 2021) enhances the learning experience. Furthermore, providing icebreakers in the form of group and individual games establishes a conducive learning atmosphere (Chumairo et al., 2022).

The learning process's strategy consciously compels teachers to know their students well and become competent educators in every respect. This is intended to ensure that students feel comfortable and safe throughout their learning journey (Valle & Connor, 2019). Previous studies showed that instilling positivity significantly affects student behavior (Cohen et al., 2019; Tokan & Imakulata, 2019). One form of this is the "Direct Instruction" strategy, which involves offering clear, repeated instructions (Eratay, 2020). Additionally, gestures, such as giving hugs and engaging in storytelling, can foster positive interactions, better communication (Farley et al., 2021), mutual understanding, and support. This is consistent with the results of previous studies (Javorina et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2018) on the importance of social support for children with special needs. Furthermore, providing leisure time to guide students in practice is important to bridging the ability gap (Tan et al., 2022).

This data analysis is generally limited to exploring teachers' experiences teaching students with special needs, but this study revealed a significant gap in their competence. The government's role needs to be more robust and wholehearted. It is essential to provide proper training to prepare teachers to teach, given that the number of inclusive classrooms will increase. In a universal context, providing basic knowledge about inclusive education to all prospective university-level teachers should be considered. Consequently, the responsibility for managing inclusive classrooms no longer rests solely with special education teachers.

■ CONCLUSION

In conclusion, understanding the teachers' experiences provided insight into the management of inclusive classrooms. Both educational background and experience in teaching in inclusive classrooms played a crucial role in optimizing the potential of inclusive students. Teachers with special EB were more likely to readily accept and be open to inclusive education. On the other hand, teachers without special EB felt confused, fearful, and worried about their ability to guide inclusive students. This situation was followed by various pressures and diverse student behaviors, which increased stress levels, sadness, and even the desire to give up. Teachers also felt challenged and realized that every child is special, unique, and deserving of quality educational services. This study revealed that inclusive teaching required not only pedagogical adaptation but also emotional resilience and institutional support. The teachers' experiences demonstrated that inclusive practice was profoundly shaped by school culture, collaborative relationships, and the availability of continuous professional learning. Theoretically, this study contributed to the expanding body of knowledge on teacher development in inclusive contexts by emphasizing how experiential learning and reflective practice influenced teachers' acceptance and pedagogical creativity. The findings extended existing theories of teacher professional growth by showing that emotional understanding and empathy were integral components of competence in inclusive classrooms. Practically, the results suggested that schools and policymakers should have provided more systematic support through regular mentoring, inclusive education workshops, and access to psychological assistance for teachers. Strengthening collaboration between general and special education teachers was also identified as essential for sustaining inclusive practices. This study acknowledged several limitations,

particularly concerning transferability. The findings were drawn from a limited number of elementary school teachers in Indonesia and, therefore, might not have fully represented broader educational contexts or levels. Future research could have explored cross-regional or longitudinal studies to better understand how teachers' attitudes and competencies evolved in inclusive environments. This study underscored that inclusive education was not merely about placing diverse learners within the same classroom, but about transforming teachers' professional identities and school culture so that every child's uniqueness became a shared source of learning.

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■ APPENDIX

Research instrument

1. How are schools prepared to accept students with special needs? Has there been any improvement in the school's acceptance of students with special needs?
2. Does the school provide individualized learning programs for students with special needs?
3. What are the teachers' experiences teaching students with special needs?
4. How does the school monitor the progress of students with special needs?
5. What are the teachers' strategies for managing classes that include both inclusive and regular students?
6. Do teachers provide individualized learning programs for students with special needs?
7. What obstacles do teachers often face when teaching in inclusive classes?
8. How do teachers address the obstacles faced by students with special needs in the classroom?
9. How is communication between teachers and parents of students with special needs regarding the obstacles their children experience?
10. How do teachers' strategies help develop the potential of students with special needs?