

Lived Experiences of Teachers Handling Students of Autism Spectrum Disorder in an English Class: Basis for School-Initiated Interventions

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of English teachers handling students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in inclusive elementary classrooms in the Municipality of Baleno, Masbate. Anchored on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Universal Design for Learning, Constructivist Learning Theory, and the Phenomenological Approach, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. Data were gathered through validated semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected English teachers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers initially experienced emotional uncertainty, inadequate preparation, and challenges in managing peer interactions and communication with students with ASD. To address these challenges, they implemented differentiated and multimodal strategies in teaching reading, writing, and comprehension while adapting communication techniques to meet learners' diverse needs. Participants also emphasized the importance of continuous professional development, access to SPED specialists, collaborative planning, contextualized instructional resources, and stronger institutional support to enhance inclusive English education. The study concludes that although teachers demonstrate commitment and adaptability, sustainable inclusive education depends on systematic school support, professional capacity building, and coordinated educational policies. The findings support Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education by promoting inclusive and equitable learning opportunities and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities by strengthening educational access and participation for learners with ASD. Furthermore, the study contributes to educational, institutional, and social sustainability by providing context-specific evidence that can improve teacher preparation, inclusive instructional practices, and school-based support systems for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Differentiated Instruction, English Teachers, Inclusive Education, Phenomenology, Teacher Experiences

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has increased the participation of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream classrooms, making effective English instruction a growing concern. Students with ASD experience challenges in communication, language comprehension, and social interaction that require differentiated teaching approaches. Despite inclusive education policies, many teachers remain inadequately prepared and supported to address these diverse learning needs. This study explores the lived experiences of English teachers handling students with ASD, their pedagogical strategies, and recommended interventions to strengthen inclusive English education.

1.1 Background on English Teachers' Experiences in Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Inclusive education, supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Salamanca Statement, and DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009, promotes equal educational opportunities for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Musisi, 2017). However, ASD, characterized by impairments in social communication and restricted repetitive behaviors (Bhat, 2021), presents significant challenges in English classrooms where language, communication, and comprehension are essential skills. Students with ASD often struggle with abstract thinking, inferential reasoning, and figurative language because traditional teaching methods do not adequately address their learning profiles (Hashim et al., 2021). Research recommends visual, multimodal, and differentiated instructional approaches to support learners with ASD (Solano, 2020). Nevertheless, teachers frequently report inadequate training, limited resources, and insufficient institutional support, particularly in inclusive classrooms without SPED or SNED teachers (Brede et al., 2017; Evans, 2016; Robertson, Chamberlain, and Kasari, 2021; Local Education Report, 2024). Despite these challenges, students with ASD possess strengths that can be maximized through responsive teaching strategies (Efthymiou, 2024). Although Philippine studies have largely focused on diagnosis, parental involvement, and behavioral management (Lagarde et al., 2025), limited research has examined the lived experiences of English teachers handling students with ASD. This study addresses this

gap by exploring teachers' experiences, instructional strategies, and recommended interventions to improve inclusive English education.

1.2 Themes and Insights from Related Literature on Inclusive English Instruction for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Related literature emphasizes that effective English instruction for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) requires structured, differentiated, and learner-centered approaches. International studies recommend the use of visual supports, structured teaching, assistive technology, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and individualized instruction to improve students' reading, writing, comprehension, communication, and social participation (Mesibov & Shea, 2019; Bondy & Frost, 1994; Wong et al., 2015; Solano, 2020; Rao & Torres, 2017). However, teachers consistently report inadequate professional preparation and limited support in implementing inclusive practices (Evans, 2016; Brede et al., 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). In the Philippine context, inclusive education is guided by DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009, yet its implementation remains constrained by insufficient teacher training, limited instructional resources, large class sizes, and the shortage of SPED or SNED teachers (Talidong & Liu, 2020; Sharma & Rangarajan, 2019; Evans, 2016; Local Education Report, 2024). Despite these challenges, studies recognize the importance of differentiated instruction, localized teaching materials, school leadership, and continuous professional development in improving inclusive English education for learners with ASD (Efthymiou, 2024; Lagarde et al., 2025).

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

Globally, inclusive education promotes the participation of learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms through evidence-based instructional practices and collaborative support systems. Research highlights the effectiveness of structured teaching, visual strategies, multidisciplinary collaboration, and teacher professional development in improving learning outcomes (Brede et al., 2017; Wainscot, Ghanouni, and Brown, 2023; Kohler et al., 2021). Nationally, the Philippines has institutionalized inclusive education through DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009. However, implementation remains inconsistent because of inadequate resources, limited specialized training, and large class sizes that challenge teachers in delivering differentiated instruction (Talidong & Liu, 2020; Cahapay, 2022; Pasumala et al., 2024). Locally, schools in the Municipality of Baleno implement inclusive education despite the absence of dedicated SPED or SNED teachers. Consequently, English teachers assume primary responsibility for supporting students with ASD, making their lived experiences essential in identifying practical instructional strategies and context-specific interventions.

1.4 Theoretical or Conceptual Basis

This study is anchored on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes learning through social interaction and teacher scaffolding; Universal Design for Learning (Rao & Torres, 2017), which advocates flexible and accessible instruction for diverse learners; Constructivist Learning Theory (Duit, 1998; Treagust, 1998), which views learners as active constructors of knowledge; and the Phenomenological Approach (Sohn et al., 2017), which guides the exploration of teachers' lived experiences in handling students with ASD in English classrooms. Together, these frameworks explain how teachers' experiences and instructional practices contribute to inclusive learning.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale

Existing literature recognizes the importance of inclusive education and evidence-based instructional strategies for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). However, most Philippine studies focus on policy implementation, parental involvement, behavioral management, or general inclusive practices, with limited attention to the lived experiences of English teachers handling students with ASD (Lagarde et al., 2025; Talidong & Liu, 2020; Pasumala et al., 2024). Likewise, there is limited qualitative evidence on teachers' instructional adaptations in reading, writing, and comprehension, particularly in schools with limited specialized support. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences, pedagogical strategies, and recommended interventions of English teachers handling students with ASD in the Municipality of Baleno. The findings are expected to provide context-specific evidence that can strengthen inclusive English instruction, teacher professional development, and school-based intervention programs.

1.6 Alignment with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns primarily with SDG 4 – Quality Education by supporting inclusive and equitable education through improved teaching strategies for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It also supports SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities by promoting inclusive classroom practices that improve educational access and participation for learners with diverse needs. These goals are reflected in the study's focus on strengthening teachers' instructional practices and developing interventions that enhance inclusive English education.

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

The study contributes to educational sustainability by providing evidence that can improve teacher preparation, instructional practices, and inclusive learning environments for students with ASD. It also supports institutional sustainability by informing school policies, professional development, and intervention planning that strengthen inclusive

education. Furthermore, the findings contribute to social sustainability by promoting equitable learning opportunities, teacher capacity, and meaningful participation of learners with ASD in mainstream English classrooms.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of English teachers handling students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to understand teachers' subjective experiences, perceptions, emotions, and instructional practices through in-depth narratives gathered using semi-structured interviews. This design was appropriate for examining how teachers interpreted and gave meaning to their experiences while identifying common themes across participants.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in three inclusive elementary schools in the Municipality of Baleno, Masbate, namely Batuila Integrated School, Baleno Central School, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux Missionary School. These schools implement inclusive education by accommodating learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream English classrooms. The selected locations provided an appropriate setting for exploring teachers' experiences within an inclusive educational environment. The geographical presentation in the original manuscript illustrates the location of the Municipality of Baleno and the participating schools, providing the contextual setting of the study.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were ten (10) English teachers handling students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream elementary classrooms from the three selected schools in the Municipality of Baleno, Masbate. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a unique code throughout the data collection and analysis. Participants were selected because they possessed direct teaching experience with students diagnosed with ASD, enabling them to provide rich descriptions relevant to the study objectives.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that intentionally selected information-rich participants with relevant experiences related to the research problem. Eligible participants were current English teachers from the selected schools who had at least one year of experience teaching students formally diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder in mainstream English classrooms and were willing to participate through informed consent. The sample size of ten participants was considered appropriate for phenomenological research because it emphasized depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a validated semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions aligned with the study objectives. The interview protocol was reviewed by experts in English language education and qualitative research to establish content validity. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to explain their experiences freely while maintaining consistency across interviews (May, 1997)⁵. This approach was appropriate for investigating complex educational experiences (Kumar, 2005)⁶. The instrument explored teachers' experiences, pedagogical strategies for teaching reading, writing, and comprehension, perceived effectiveness of these strategies, encountered challenges, coping mechanisms, and recommendations for improving inclusive education. Audio recordings, supported by field notes, ensured the accuracy and completeness of the collected data.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews with the selected participants after obtaining informed consent and explaining the study objectives, confidentiality measures, and participants' right to withdraw. Interviews were conducted in safe and convenient locations, including school offices, quiet areas within school premises, and, when necessary, remotely through Facebook Messenger during the vacation period while following the same interview protocol. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to preserve confidentiality before analysis.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study utilized thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006)⁷ to analyze the interview transcripts. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcripts and field notes to become familiar with the data before generating initial codes relevant to the research questions. Similar codes were organized into themes, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, defined, and interpreted to ensure consistency and alignment with the study objectives. The findings were presented as a coherent narrative supported by participants' statements, while a reflective journal was maintained throughout the analysis to strengthen the transparency and trustworthiness of the research.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly observed ethical research standards by obtaining informed consent from all participants before data collection. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the anonymization of interview transcripts and audio recordings, with access restricted to the researcher. Participants were likewise informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty, ensuring respect for their autonomy and welfare throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Lived Experiences of English Teachers Handling Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

3.1.1 Emotional Ambivalence and Cognitive Dissonance during Initial Teaching Experiences

The participants described their first experiences teaching students with ASD as emotionally challenging and professionally overwhelming. Most teachers experienced fear, uncertainty, helplessness, guilt, and confusion because they had limited knowledge and preparation for handling learners with ASD. They struggled to balance lesson implementation with responding to students' emotional and behavioral needs. Many also reported receiving little information about students' diagnoses before classroom placement, resulting in feelings of frustration and self-doubt. Despite these challenges, teachers gradually became more patient, empathetic, and confident as they gained experience and observed small but meaningful improvements in students' learning and communication. These findings indicate that teachers' emotional struggles largely resulted from inadequate preparation and limited institutional support rather than unwillingness to teach students with ASD. The tension between maintaining instructional objectives and responding compassionately to students reflects the cognitive dissonance experienced by teachers adapting to inclusive education. Similar findings were reported by Robertson, Chamberlain, and Kasari (2021)¹, who emphasized that insufficient ASD-focused professional development contributes to emotional stress and reduced instructional confidence. Likewise, Festinger (1957)² explains that conflicting beliefs and responsibilities create psychological discomfort, while Keen et al. (2020)³ highlighted the gap between teacher preparation and actual classroom realities when working with neurodiverse learners.

3.1.2 Interpersonal Tensions and Peer Dynamics in the Classroom

Teachers reported that peer relationships significantly influenced the classroom experiences of students with ASD. Some classmates displayed empathy by providing constant assistance, while others unintentionally promoted dependency or excluded students with ASD from classroom activities. Teachers observed instances of misunderstanding, ridicule, and social isolation resulting from classmates' limited awareness of autism. To address these issues, participants implemented peer-sensitization activities, storytelling, classroom discussions, and structured group interactions that promoted understanding, acceptance, and independence among students. They emphasized that meaningful inclusion required active teacher guidance rather than simply placing students with ASD in mainstream classrooms. The findings demonstrate that successful inclusion extends beyond instructional strategies to the development of positive peer relationships and an inclusive classroom culture. Teachers played an essential role in promoting empathy while preventing overdependence and social exclusion. These results support Biklen (2000)⁴, who noted that well-intentioned assistance may unintentionally foster dependency when not carefully managed. Likewise, Humphrey and Lewis (2008)⁵ emphasized that teachers strongly influence peer attitudes toward students with ASD through inclusive classroom practices. The use of literature and storytelling to develop empathy also aligns with differentiated instructional principles proposed by Tomlinson (2014)⁶, highlighting the value of emotionally responsive teaching in inclusive education.

3.2 Pedagogical Strategies and Approaches Employed in Teaching Reading, Writing, and Comprehension

3.2.1 Differentiated Strategies for Teaching Reading

The findings revealed that teachers shifted from traditional reading instruction to differentiated and multisensory approaches to accommodate the learning needs of students with ASD. Participants utilized visual supports, story maps, sequencing charts, paired reading, audiobooks, teacher-recorded reading materials, drawing activities, and comic representations to assess reading comprehension. These strategies enabled students who had difficulty responding verbally or through written tests to demonstrate their understanding using alternative formats. Teachers recognized that students with ASD often comprehended reading selections despite being unable to express their understanding through conventional classroom assessments. The findings suggest that differentiated reading instruction provides students with ASD multiple opportunities to demonstrate comprehension according to their individual strengths. Rather than lowering academic expectations, teachers expanded the ways students could access and express learning. These findings support Wainscot et al. (2023)⁷, who emphasized that multimodal reading strategies improve comprehension among learners with ASD by allowing visual and narrative forms of expression. The use of visual organizers and auditory supports likewise reflects inclusive instructional practices that accommodate diverse learning preferences.

3.2.2 Differentiated Strategies for Teaching Writing

Teachers reported modifying writing activities by providing guide questions, sentence starters, graphic organizers, fill-in-the-blank exercises, guided journals, visual prompts, and real-life writing topics. Some participants also incorporated

technology, such as digital storytelling applications, to encourage written expression among students who were reluctant to write using traditional methods. Instead of requiring students to complete complex writing tasks independently, teachers divided writing activities into manageable steps and focused on developing one writing skill at a time. These instructional adaptations helped reduce students' anxiety and cognitive overload while promoting greater participation in writing activities. Structured writing tasks enabled learners with ASD to organize their ideas more effectively and express themselves using formats aligned with their strengths. These findings are consistent with Mesibov and Shea (2019)⁹, who emphasized the importance of structured language output, and Keen, Webster, and Ridley (2020)¹⁰, who highlighted the visual-spatial and technological strengths commonly demonstrated by learners with ASD.

3.2.3 Differentiated Strategies for Teaching Comprehension

Teachers assessed comprehension through role-playing, dramatization, drawing activities, picture sequencing, visual summaries, and explicit instruction on inferential thinking and figurative language. Instead of relying solely on question-and-answer activities, participants encouraged students to demonstrate understanding through alternative performance-based tasks. Teachers also increased lesson predictability by providing lesson outlines, advance reading materials, and structured classroom routines, which improved students' participation and comprehension. They emphasized that differentiation involved maintaining the same learning objectives while allowing different methods of demonstrating understanding. The findings indicate that differentiated comprehension strategies promote equitable learning opportunities without reducing academic standards. Teachers focused on providing alternative pathways for students to achieve the same learning outcomes, reflecting the principles of Universal Design for Learning. Consistent classroom routines and predictable instructional processes also reduced anxiety and increased classroom participation. These findings support Wong et al. (2015)¹¹, who argued that differentiated strategies designed for neurodiverse learners improve engagement and comprehension while benefiting the entire classroom.

3.2.4 Communicative Barriers and the Importance of Patience

The participants identified communication as one of the greatest challenges in teaching students with ASD. They observed delayed verbal responses, echolalia, non-verbal communication, inconsistent participation, and communication through writing, gestures, or visual aids. To address these challenges, teachers extended wait time, accepted alternative forms of communication, used visual communication cards, provided sentence starters and choice-based responses, and relied on non-verbal encouragement to build trust and reduce communication anxiety. Despite limited formal training, teachers gradually developed communication strategies through experience and continuous observation. The findings demonstrate that effective communication with students with ASD requires patience, flexibility, and recognition of multiple forms of expression. Teachers learned that silence, gestures, drawings, and written responses were valid means of communication rather than indicators of disengagement. These findings support Iovannone, Kunemund, and Elkins (2022)¹², who reported that extended teacher wait time significantly improves verbal responses among students with ASD. Likewise, Prizant and Rydell (2016)¹³ recognized echolalia as part of language processing, while Keen et al. (2020)¹⁴ emphasized the importance of adapting communication according to students' sensory and emotional needs. The relationship-centered approach described by teachers also aligns with Mesibov and Shea (2019)¹⁵, who highlighted trust and positive teacher-student relationships as foundations for meaningful communication.

3.3 School-Initiated Interventions for Inclusive English Education

3.3.1 Professional Development on ASD-Specific Pedagogy

The participants unanimously emphasized the need for regular professional development focused specifically on teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in English classrooms. They expressed that previous training mainly introduced general concepts of special education but provided limited practical guidance on teaching reading, writing, comprehension, and communication. Teachers recommended demonstration teaching, classroom simulations, case-based learning, and subject-specific instructional workshops that directly address the realities of inclusive English instruction. The findings indicate that teachers require practical and continuous professional development rather than purely theoretical discussions of inclusive education. Subject-specific training can improve teachers' confidence and instructional competence while strengthening inclusive classroom practices. These findings support Wong et al. (2015)¹⁶, who emphasized that evidence-based interventions become effective only when translated into practical classroom strategies that teachers can readily implement.

3.3.2 Access to SPED Specialists and Multidisciplinary Support

Teachers consistently expressed the need for access to SPED coordinators, behavioral therapists, and educational specialists who could provide professional guidance in managing students with ASD. Most participants reported relying on parents, online resources, and personal experience because their schools lacked in-house specialists. They believed that regular consultation with experts would improve behavior management, communication strategies, and instructional decision-making. The findings demonstrate that inclusive education requires collaborative support beyond the classroom teacher. Access to multidisciplinary professionals strengthens teachers' instructional decisions and promotes more consistent

interventions for learners with ASD. These findings support Iovannone et al. (2022)¹⁷, who emphasized the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration in establishing sustainable inclusive educational environments.

3.3.3 Collaborative Planning Between General and Special Education Teachers

Participants recommended regular collaboration between general education and SPED teachers to improve lesson planning and instructional adaptations for students with ASD. Teachers believed that collaborative planning would allow them to design more individualized learning activities while maintaining curriculum standards. However, they reported that opportunities for consultation were generally unavailable, leaving teachers to develop strategies independently. The findings suggest that collaborative instructional planning enhances both teacher confidence and the quality of inclusive education. Shared expertise enables teachers to implement differentiated instruction more effectively while ensuring that instructional decisions meet students' diverse learning needs. These findings are consistent with Kohler et al. (2021)¹⁸, who reported that collaborative teaching and consultation improve instructional effectiveness and student outcomes in inclusive settings.

3.3.4 Development of Contextualized Instructional Resources

Teachers identified the lack of localized instructional materials as a major challenge in inclusive English education. Existing resources were often foreign, highly technical, or culturally inappropriate for Filipino learners. Participants recommended developing Filipino-authored teaching guides, contextualized lesson plans, case-based instructional materials, and scaffolded learning resources that reflect local culture and classroom realities while supporting students with ASD. The findings indicate that culturally relevant instructional materials improve both teacher preparedness and student engagement by making learning more meaningful and accessible. Contextualized resources also support differentiated instruction while recognizing learners' cultural backgrounds. This finding supports the sociocultural perspective of Vygotsky (1978)¹⁹, which emphasizes the importance of culturally meaningful learning experiences in knowledge construction.

3.3.5 Institutional Policy Support and Leadership Commitment

Participants emphasized that successful inclusive education depends on strong administrative support. Teachers reported that strict adherence to pacing guides, limited administrative understanding of ASD, and inadequate institutional policies often restricted their ability to implement differentiated instruction. They recommended leadership support, inclusive school policies, and administrative recognition of flexible instructional practices that respond to the needs of students with ASD. Overall, teachers agreed that sustainable inclusion requires systematic institutional support rather than relying solely on individual teacher initiative. The findings demonstrate that teacher commitment alone is insufficient to sustain inclusive education. Effective implementation requires supportive school leadership, institutional policies, continuous professional development, and adequate educational resources. Without these structures, inclusive practices remain dependent on individual teachers' creativity and emotional resilience. The participants' recommendations therefore highlight the need for school-based interventions that strengthen teacher capacity, promote collaborative practice, and establish supportive learning environments for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in English classrooms.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This study concludes that English teachers handling students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) demonstrate commitment and adaptability despite limited preparation and institutional support. Their lived experiences revealed emotional challenges, the need to manage peer dynamics, and the use of differentiated instructional strategies in teaching reading, writing, and comprehension. However, these practices remain largely dependent on teachers' individual initiative rather than structured school support. The findings further indicate that sustainable inclusive education requires institutional commitment through policies, professional development, curriculum flexibility, and coordinated support systems to effectively meet the diverse needs of learners with ASD.

Schools should strengthen inclusive education by providing regular ASD-specific professional development, increasing access to SPED coordinators or consultants, developing contextualized instructional resources, institutionalizing peer-sensitization programs, strengthening parent-teacher collaboration, and integrating appropriate curriculum accommodations for learners with ASD. These recommendations aim to improve teachers' instructional competence and establish a more supportive, inclusive, and sustainable English learning environment for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The study was limited to the lived experiences of ten English teachers from three inclusive elementary schools in the Municipality of Baleno, Masbate. As a qualitative phenomenological study, the findings were based solely on participants' narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, making the results context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. Consequently, the findings represent the experiences within the selected schools and may not fully reflect the experiences of teachers in other educational settings.

Compliance with ethical standards

The author declares no conflict of interest. This study received no external funding. The researchers acknowledge the participation of the English teachers from the selected inclusive elementary schools in the Municipality of Baleno, Masbate, whose voluntary participation and informed consent made the study possible. Data were collected through non-invasive semi-structured interviews, and all information was treated with strict confidentiality through anonymization and the removal of identifying details to protect participants' privacy.

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