Challenges Faced by K-6 General Education Teachers

in Teaching Students with Disabilities

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by

Jillian Blugis

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Keywords: special education, inclusive education, teacher experiences, diverse learning needs,

instructional challenges

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Committee Chair: Dr. Jason T. Hilton, Ph.D.

    Professor of Education

    Slippery Rock University

Committee Member: Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey, Ph.D.

    Professor of Special Education

    Slippery Rock University

Committee Member: Dr. Jesse Smith, Ed.D., BCBA

    Assistant Professor of Special Education

    Slippery Rock University

ABSTRACT

This study looked at what general education teachers in grades K–6 experience when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. It took place in a small, rural school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the challenges general education teachers face in inclusive classrooms and how these challenges affect their ability to support all students. The central research question asked what challenges teachers experience when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Grounded theory was used as the study's framework to analyze teacher experiences and identify common themes. Eight teachers were interviewed on Zoom to learn about their daily challenges and what supports they need. The study found five main problems: limited training, not enough time to plan with others, having to meet the needs of many students, emotional stress, and not getting clear support from school leaders. Despite these difficulties, teachers were very dedicated to caring for their students. Findings showed that even though teachers faced barriers, they remained committed to inclusion and student success. The study recommends that schools provide more professional development, allow additional collaboration time, and offer stronger administrative support. These improvements can make inclusion work better for all students by giving teachers more help.

Keywords: special education, inclusive education, teacher experiences, diverse learning needs, instructional challenges

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Aleyah, who was born on November 19, 2025. You are already my greatest inspiration. You have pushed me harder than you will ever know, and I cannot wait to watch you grow. I worked tirelessly before your arrival so that this would not take away from the precious time we now share together.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Topic

Inclusive education is a big part of public schools in the United States today. It means that students with disabilities learn in the same classrooms as students without disabilities. This idea is supported by laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which says every student should get a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Generally, this means students with disabilities should be included in regular classrooms to the maximum extent appropriate, where they are most likely to succeed. Students who need extra assistance may receive specialized instruction or resources outside the general education classroom, tailored to support their unique learning needs. This kind of inclusion helps all students grow, not just academically, but also in their social and emotional skills (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Hehir et al., 2016).

Special education laws have changed a lot over time and helped make schools more inclusive. In the past, students with disabilities were often left out of regular classrooms. However, important laws like IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act made sure all students could get an education with the support they need (Nathanson, 2008; Patterson, 2020). Court cases and updates to these laws have made the rules even clearer, making sure students with disabilities can learn with their classmates who do not have disabilities (Colker, 2013; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Understanding this historical context is essential to grasp the challenges educators face in implementing inclusive education today.

Inclusion helps everyone in the classroom, not just students with disabilities. It gives students with disabilities the chance to learn and make friends, while students without disabilities learn to be kind, understanding, and develop important social skills. They learn to work well with

others by having meaningful experiences with classmates who are more diverse in background (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Hehir et al., 2016). This makes the school a more positive and welcoming place. In the early grades (kindergarten through sixth grade), when children are still learning the basics and how to get along with others, it is important to include every student. Starting inclusion early can have a big impact on how well students do in school and later in life (Hehir et al., 2016).

Inclusion has improved tremendously over the years, but it is up to general education teachers to make it work. They are tasked with meeting a wide range of learning and behavioral needs without always having the necessary training, resources, or support (Apitz et al., 2017; Tiwari, 2024). Teachers are responsible for full classrooms, attending IEP meetings, and collaborating with special education staff, all while changing their lessons for different kinds of students. Also, many schools do not have enough staff or enough chances for training (Goldstein et al., 2013; Lindacher, 2020). As a result, many educators believe they are not prepared to teach effectively in an inclusive classroom (Al Jaffal, 2022; DeSutter & LeMire, 2016). Due to a lack of funding, training, and support, these issues are even more severe in rural schools.

The bigger issue is that there is a gap between the idea of inclusive education and what realistically happens in classrooms. Even though inclusion is becoming more common, there is not much research about what general education teachers really go through, especially teachers in rural schools, who have to make inclusion work even when it is difficult. This study focused on the thoughts and experiences of general education teachers in inclusive elementary classrooms, highlighting the challenges they encountered with instruction and school regulations.

The study aimed to improve inclusive education in all schools by sharing the experiences of teachers and promoting supportive policies and practices that strengthen resources and training for educators to enhance student outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Inclusive education is implemented in schools across the United States, but general education teachers often still find it hard to help students with disabilities in their classrooms. It is even harder in small, rural schools because there are not enough staff, training, or special resources to help (Lindacher, 2020; Tiwari, 2024). Teachers have to teach students with different needs while also helping the rest of the class learn. This can make teachers feel stressed, frustrated, and very tired (Apitz et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2015).

This study took place at an elementary school in a rural part of Northeastern Pennsylvania. At this school, teachers for grades kindergarten through sixth taught students with and without disabilities all together in the same classroom. These teachers often have to manage student behavior, change their lessons for different learners, and follow special education laws, yet the level of support they receive in doing so varied. Teachers' feelings of preparedness and stress varied, and understanding their experiences shed light on challenges in inclusive education.

Even though more schools are using inclusive education, there is not much research about what general education teachers go through in rural schools. It is important to understand these problems because early elementary school is a key time for students to learn and grow. This study helped by looking at what inclusion really looked like every day in a rural school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn more about what it was like for general education teachers who worked in inclusive classrooms in a small, rural school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania. In these classrooms, students with disabilities learned together with students who do not have disabilities. In many classrooms, additional teachers or support staff may not always be present.

Teachers often struggle to meet the different learning and behavior needs of all their students. They may lack the training, support, or tools they need to help every student succeed. The law (IDEA, 2004) says that students with disabilities must be taught in the least restrictive environment (LRE), which generally means placement in a general education classroom to the maximum extent appropriate, where they are most likely to succeed. If a student requires additional support, services may be provided in a special education setting to address their individual needs. Because inclusion has increased the number of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, it is especially important to understand how teachers handle these requirements in real life.

This study sought to gain insight into teachers' perceptions, challenges, and strategies related to inclusive education. It was grounded in qualitative research traditions that focus on understanding people's lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study also focused on challenges that are especially common in rural schools, like not having enough training or staff. The goal was to add to what we already know about inclusive education by highlighting the experiences of general education teachers, whose voices often get overlooked in research.

The hope was that this study can help administrators, policymakers, and teacher preparation programs come up with better ways to support general education teachers. If teachers get more help, they can do a better job teaching all students, no matter what their needs are.

Research Question(s)

This study focused on one main research question and two sub-questions to learn about what general education teachers experienced while working in inclusive classrooms.

Primary Research Question:

- What challenges do general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

Sub-questions:

- How do these challenges impact their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively?

- What types of support or resources do general education teachers report needing to better support students with disabilities?

These questions sought to better understand the challenges general education teachers faced, how these challenges affected their teaching, and what kinds of help could improve their instructional practices for students with disabilities and the whole classroom.

Context of the Study Setting

A small, rural public elementary school in Northeastern Pennsylvania served as the setting for this study. The school was one of two in the district and served students in kindergarten through sixth grade. In addition to 17 classroom teachers, five special educators, and seven to eight paraprofessionals, the school had one principal.

Many of the students in the district came from low-income families. Approximately 42 percent of the student population was economically disadvantaged, qualifying the district to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of income. These socioeconomic factors, combined with the needs of students with disabilities, often contributed to additional

challenges faced by general education teachers. Research indicated that general education teachers who instructed students with disabilities often experienced additional strain (Goldstein et al., 2013; Maanum, 2009). Teachers often reported challenges, including limited time and insufficient assistance needed to organize efficient instruction.

The school highlighted equitable learning environments and inclusion as important goals, while supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development to help them reach their full potential. However, staff members' views on inclusion varied based on their education and experience (Al Jaffal, 2022; Knouse, 2018). Some experienced teachers' discomfort or lack of confidence with inclusive teaching may lead to uneven support in the classroom. Furthermore, when general education and special education teachers are not provided with adequate time or clear guidelines to effectively collaborate, co-teaching and planning are challenging (Lindacher, 2020).

To ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), the school must abide by laws such as IDEA (2004) and Section 504. However, it is challenging to fully meet these requirements due to a lack of training and resources. Despite the lack of adequate support from the system, educators make every effort to adhere to the law. Teachers may become stressed out and dissatisfied with their work as a result of this (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Smith et al., 2015).

The study assumed that the teachers at this school want to help their students succeed and believe in inclusivity, despite the fact that they face challenges that are out of their control. It also assumed that teachers found it more challenging to successfully adopt inclusive teaching practices due to problems like a shortage of personnel, inadequate training, and a lack of planning time.

Existing Research

To better understand the problem of inclusive education implementation, this study examined key concepts in the literature related to special education law, disability classification, the inclusive education process, and the everyday challenges faced by general education teachers. A strong focus was placed on identifying barriers such as inadequate training, lack of resources, unclear role expectations, and teacher attitudes toward inclusion. These problems were some of the biggest challenges to making inclusion work well (Al Jaffal, 2022; Apitz et al., 2017; Lindacher, 2020). Research also showed that inclusive education had many benefits when students received the right support. Students with disabilities usually performed better in school and socially when they learned alongside their peers without disabilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Hehir et al., 2016). But for this to happen, general education teachers needed to be well prepared, work together with others, and have support from school leaders (Goldstein et al., 2013; Tiwari, 2024).

Some important studies helped guide this research. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) introduced the idea of inclusive pedagogy, which focused on teaching in ways that help all students learn. It showed how important it was to change teaching methods to meet the needs of every student by planning ahead and working together. Their research gave a basic idea of how teachers could create classrooms that include all students, no matter their abilities. Tracy's (2013) criteria for high-quality qualitative research, including credibility, sincerity, and meaningful coherence, also guided the design and ethical considerations of the study.

This study used grounded theory to analyze the data. Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), meant letting ideas and patterns come from what the participants said, rather than forcing them into pre-set categories. This approach made sure the study stayed true to

the teachers' real experiences and let their voices guide the findings and suggestions. Together, inclusive teaching ideas and grounded theory, provided a strong base for exploring what inclusive education really looked like from the point of view of general education teachers in early elementary grades.

Significance of the Study

As inclusion becomes the normal way schools teach, general education teachers are expected to help students with many different abilities all in one classroom. While the laws and reasons for inclusion are clear, the real problems teachers face, especially in schools with fewer resources or in rural areas, are not studied enough. This study looked at what general education teachers experienced in inclusive elementary classrooms to help fill that gap.

This study is important because it could help school leaders, policymakers, and teacher training programs understand the real challenges teachers face. By sharing the experiences of K–6 teachers in a rural Pennsylvania school, the study showed where more support is needed, like better training, ways to work together, managing the classroom, and having the right teaching materials (Apitz et al., 2017; DeSutter & LeMire, 2016).

This study aimed to show how systematic issues like not having enough staff, not enough time to work with others, and unclear guidance from administrators could make it harder for teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Knowing this could help create better plans to support teachers and improve learning for all students.

By sharing the voices of general education teachers who are often left out of studies that focus more on special education teachers or school policies, this study added to existing literature about inclusive education. It was important to understand their challenges and views to

make sure inclusion was not just something schools have to do by law, but something that worked effectively and is sustainable.

The results of this study could help improve teacher training, influence school rules, and support fair and effective inclusion in many different kinds of schools.

Limitations

While delimitations are the boundaries of a study that the researcher chooses on purpose to help keep the study focused, this section addresses limitations. Limitations are factors that arose from the study's setting, methods, or other conditions beyond the researcher's control. These constraints may affect the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. In this study, several choices were made to keep the project manageable and to allow for a more focused examination of the topic.

First, the study only looked at general education teachers who taught grades K–6. Basic academic, emotional, and social skills are especially important in these early grades. Therefore, teachers in higher grades (7th grade and up) were not included because this study focused on early elementary school, where early learning and inclusion can significantly shape how young students experience school.

Second, all the teachers in the study worked in one small rural elementary school in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This school was chosen because it used an inclusion model, meaning students with and without disabilities learn together in the same classrooms. Because the study only looked at this one school, the results might not apply to schools in cities or suburbs.

Third, this study used interviews to gather information, which is part of a research style called Grounded Theory. This method helped the researcher develop a theory grounded in the

experiences and perspectives of participants. The goal was not to apply the findings to all teachers everywhere, but to learn about what this specific group of teachers thought and felt.

Fourth, only teachers who currently had at least one student with a disability in their regular, core academic classroom were asked to be in the study. Teachers who only worked with gifted students, do not currently have students with disabilities, or teach special subjects like art, music, or gym, as well as specialists, were not included.

Fifth**,** the number of participants in the study was limited to a small group of teachers. This smaller sample size was chosen to allow for more in-depth interviews and detailed analysis.

These choices were made to focus the study on teachers who are directly working with students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. This helped the researcher understand the real challenges and needs of those teachers more clearly.

These limitations were chosen to focus the research on those with direct and current experience in inclusive classroom teaching, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the specific challenges and supports related to inclusion in early elementary education.

Definition of Terms

This section explains important terms and ideas used in this study. It helps readers understand what these words mean and how they are used in the research.

504 Plan: A strategy for students with disabilities who need support or accommodations to learn in a regular classroom but do not require special education services (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2024).

Accommodation: Help or modifications given to students with disabilities so they can complete the same assignments as their classmates (Al Jaffal, 2022).

Assistive Technology: Devices or tools that make tasks easier for students with disabilities are known as assistive technology. Communication boards, audiobooks, and speech-to-text applications are a few examples of this (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009).

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP): A plan created to help a student who behaves problematically. According to the needs of the student, it employs tactics and materials (IDEA, 2004).

Co-Teaching: When a special education teacher and a general education teacher work together in the same classroom to teach all the students (Bateman & Cline, 2016).

Due Process: A legal method by which families and schools can settle disputes regarding a student's education, particularly in the context of special education (IDEA, 2004).

Disability: IDEA defines disability as having conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment (including blindness) that indicate a student requires additional support at school (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; IDEA, 2004).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): A law that says students with disabilities must get an education that fits their needs at no cost to their families (IDEA, 2004).

General Education Teacher: A teacher who teaches in a regular classroom and works with students of all abilities, including those with disabilities.

Grounded Theory: A type of research that looks for patterns and ideas based on what people say, instead of using a theory that already exists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Inclusion: When students with disabilities are taught in general education classrooms along with their peers who do not have disabilities to get the support they need to succeed (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; IDEA, 2004).

Inclusive Pedagogy: A teaching approach that focuses on helping all students learn by planning ahead for different needs and being flexible (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A legal plan made for a student with a disability. It includes goals, services, and supports to help that student do well in school (Maanum, 2009).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A federal law that protects the rights of students with disabilities and requires schools to provide services and support (IDEA, 2004).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): The educational setting in which a student with a disability is most likely to succeed, with an emphasis on placement in a general education classroom whenever appropriate, while receiving the necessary supports and services (IDEA, 2004).

Modification: Changes made to what a student is expected to learn or do. For example, a student with reading problems might get easier assignments that focus on the main ideas (Apitz et al., 2017).

Paraprofessional: A school staff member who helps students with disabilities in the classroom. They usually work under the teacher's guidance.

Progress Monitoring: When teachers check often how students are doing in their schoolwork or behavior to see if they need more help or if they are getting better (Al Jaffal, 2022).

Professional Development: Ongoing training that helps teachers learn new skills, especially for working in inclusive classrooms (Apitz et al., 2017).

Public School: A school run by the government that offers free education to kids from kindergarten through 12th grade (DeSutter & LeMire, 2016).

Purposive Sampling: A way of choosing people for a study based on their experience with the topic being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Special Education: Teaching and support made especially for students with disabilities to help them learn and do well in school (Bateman & Cline, 2016).

Special Education Teacher: A teacher who is trained to help students with disabilities by supporting them directly, creating IEPs, and working with general education teachers.

Chapter One Summary

This chapter introduced the background, reasons, and goals of this study. The study focused on what it was like for general education teachers who taught in inclusive early elementary classrooms in a rural area of Northeastern Pennsylvania. It started by explaining what inclusive education is and how it is based on a law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The chapter also explained why inclusive education is becoming more important in today's schools. It briefly reviewed how special education laws have changed over time and highlighted the benefits of including students with disabilities in regular classrooms.

The main problem the study focused on was that general education teachers often faced big challenges when trying to include students with disabilities, especially in rural schools where there might not be enough resources, staff, or training. The chapter outlined the goals of the research, the questions it attempted to answer, and the general location of the study. It also

discussed the key concepts of the study, such as grounded theory and inclusive teaching

practices. Important terms were also explained.

      This study sought to share the voices of general education teachers to better understand

how inclusion really worked in classrooms. The goal was to help improve school policies,

teacher training, and support so inclusion can be more effective and sustainable. The next chapter

reviews important research about laws, disability types, special education processes, and

common problems teachers face in inclusive classrooms.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to the Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to look at the problems general education teachers faced when teaching students with disabilities in regular classrooms. This chapter reviews what existing literature said about inclusion in schools and is divided into six main parts: (1) a historical overview of special education law; (2) the categories of disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); (3) the legal and policy context surrounding inclusion; (4) common challenges faced by general education teachers; (5) the impact of inclusion on student outcomes; (6) current gaps in the literature, implications for practice and future research.

Research Question(s)

This study was guided by the following research question:

Primary Research Question:

- What challenges do general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

Sub-questions:

- How do these challenges impact their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively?

- What types of support or resources do general education teachers report needing to better support students with disabilities?

Need for the Study

This study was significant due to the increasing integration of students with disabilities into regular classrooms. General education teachers were expected to teach all students, but

many said they do not feel ready or do not get enough support. This study focused on the

perspectives of general education teachers regarding their experiences. The goal was to help

improve teacher training, school rules, and teamwork between teachers so that students with

disabilities receive a better and more equitable education.

Historical Overview of Special Education Law

Before the 1960s, students with disabilities often did not have the same chance to go to

school as other students. Many were kept out of public schools and placed in institutions, as

public schools were not required to educate them (Patterson, 2020). In 1954, things began to

change with the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). Even

though that case was about ending racial segregation, it helped push the idea that all students

should receive equal education, including those with disabilities. *Brown v. Board of Education*

also set the stage for PARC v. Pennsylvania (1972), which built on this foundation and

ultimately led to the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children

(EHA), considered the formal beginning of publicly provided special education in the United

States. Later, in 1965, the government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

(ESEA), which gave money to schools to help students in need, including those with disabilities

(Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

In 1972, *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* affirmed the right of students with

disabilities to receive a public education tailored to their specific needs (Pennsylvania

Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1972). In 1973, the U.S.

Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act, a landmark piece of legislation that led to the enactment

of Section 504. This section made it illegal for any school receiving federal funding to

discriminate against students based on their disability and also provided broad civil rights

protections for people with disabilities in all programs, as well as programs that receive federal financial assistance (National Council on Disability, 2003). A few years after the Rehabilitation Act was passed, the regulations of Section 504 were first implemented in 1977, providing clear guidelines to enforce the law and protect students with disabilities from discrimination in schools and other federally funded programs. Then, in 1975, Congress passed another important law, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). This ensured students with disabilities had the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This law also introduced the requirement for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which is a plan made for a child's unique needs (Nathanson, 2008). Over time, important Supreme Court cases like *Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garret F. (1999)* and *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)* helped make the rules clearer about how IDEA and Section 504 should be used, and what kind of education students with disabilities get.

In 1990, the name of the law changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This new version used more respectful language by saying "students with disabilities" instead of "handicapped children," emphasizing the use of person-first language. The IDEA was updated in 1997 to include transition services to help students prepare for adulthood once they turn fourteen years old, and behavior support for behavior problems to meet their needs. That same year, another law was passed, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This law assured people with disabilities were treated fairly not only in school, but in other areas of life such as occupations and public places (Colker, 2013).

In 2004, Congress amended IDEA, and it became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. This version was partly revised with the No Child Left

Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), which focused on making sure schools were held accountable

through evidence-based instructional practices, accountability, and clear guidance around due

process and discipline procedures for students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

More recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) continued to support

inclusion by making sure all students, including those with disabilities, can participate in the

regular classroom environment (ESSA, 2015). Together, these legislative developments have

helped make schools more equitable and have made sure students with disabilities get equal

chances in education. Below, Table 2.1, presents a concise overview of the timeline of events

leading to major milestones in special education.

Table 2.1

Timeline of Key Legal Milestones in Special Education (Blugis, 2026)

Year/Event	*Description*
1954 ***Brown v. Board of Education***	*Established right to equal education, laying groundwork for inclusion.*
1965 ***Elementary & Secondary Education Act (ESEA)***	*Federal funding to support disadvantaged and special needs students.*
1972 ***PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania***	*Guaranteed public education for students with disabilities.*
1973 ***Section 504 of***	*Prohibited disability discrimination in federally funded programs.*

the Rehabilitation Act	
1975 ***Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)***	*Required FAPE and IEPs for students with disabilities.*
1990 ***Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)***	*Renamed EAHCA; emphasized person-first language and transition plans.*
1990 ***Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)***	*Banned disability discrimination in public life, including schools.*
1997 ***IDEA Reauthorization***	*Increased general education involvement and transition planning.*
2001 ***No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)***	*Held schools accountable for progress of all students, including those with disabilities.*
2004 ***Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act***	*Aligned IDEA with NCLB; added evidence-based practices and discipline guidance.*
2015 ***Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)***	*Replaced NCLB; promoted inclusion and state accountability.*

Each milestone reflected the progress made in special education over the years. Prior to 1954, students with disabilities were often segregated and denied equal access to education. Each milestone has contributed to the ongoing advancement of equity and inclusion for students with disabilities, and that progress continues today.

Categories of Disabilities Under IDEA

IDEA (2004) outlines 13 specific disability categories that determine eligibility for special education services in U.S. public schools. These include: autism spectrum disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment (including blindness). Additionally, while not one of the original 13 categories, many states recognize developmental delay as an early-childhood eligibility category, allowing intervention services when a child demonstrates significant delays in areas such as cognitive, physical, communication, social or emotional, or adaptive development. The age varies in most states, however, in Pennsylvania, eligibility is from ages three through nine. Once a child surpasses the state-defined age limit for developmental delay, IDEA Part B requires the IEP team to re-evaluate to determine eligibility under one of the thirteen specific disability categories (IDEA, 2004).

During the 2022-2023 school year, approximately 15 percent of all public-school students received special education services (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). This makes up about seven and a half million students. Furthermore, the most common disability category was specific learning disability, representing 32 percent of this population. Other common categories include: speech or language impairment (19 percent), other health impairment (15 percent), autism spectrum disorder (13 percent), developmental delay (7

percent), intellectual disability (6 percent), emotional disturbance (4 percent), multiple

disabilities (2 percent), and hearing impairment (1 percent). The remaining disability categories

each represented less than one percent of students receiving services. This legislation ensures

that students with disabilities are guaranteed FAPE in the LRE, meaning they have access to

general education curriculum and are educated with their non-disabled peers to the greatest

extent appropriate (Maanum, 2009). Table 2.2 below summarizes the disability categories

defined and described under IDEA, along with prevalence data from the National Center for

Education Statistics (IDEA, 2004; NCES, 2024).

Table 2.2

Disability Categories Under IDEA: Descriptions and Prevalence (Blugis, 2026)

Disability Category	*Description*	*Prevalence*
Autism Spectrum Disorder	*Neurodevelopmental condition affecting communication, social interaction, and behavior.*	*13%*
Deaf-Blindness	*Combined hearing and vision impairments that severely impact communication and learning.*	*<1%*
Deafness	*Profound hearing loss that limits ability to process spoken language, even with aids.*	*<1%*
Emotional Disturbance	*Mental health issues that impact learning and behavior.*	*4%*
Hearing Impairment	*Partial hearing loss that may fluctuate or be permanent.*	*1%*
Intellectual Disability	*Below-average cognitive functioning and deficits in adaptive behavior.*	*6%*

Multiple Disabilities	*Two or more impairments that together require intensive support.*	*2%*
Orthopedic Impairment	*Physical disabilities caused by conditions like cerebral palsy or amputations.*	*<1%*
Other Health Impairment	*Chronic or acute health problems (e.g., ADHD, asthma, epilepsy) impacting alertness or vitality.*	*15%*
Specific Learning Disability	*Neurological processing disorder affecting reading, writing, or math.*	*32%*
Speech or Language Impairment	*Difficulties in communication such as articulation, fluency, or language use.*	*19%*
Traumatic Brain Injury	*Brain injury caused by external physical force, acquired after birth.*	*<1%*
Visual Impairment (including blindness)	*Partial or total vision loss that affects educational performance.*	*<1%*
Developmental Delay	*Early significant delays in cognitive, physical, communication, or social/emotional development.*	*7%*

These categories help schools to identify student needs, develop IEPs, and determine the appropriate accommodations and services required for students to be successful in their learning.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-5-TR), a manual published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), provides standardized criteria and classifications for diagnosing mental health and developmental disorders. This manual is used by psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and other mental health professionals to ensure diagnoses are consistent and accurate. It plays an important role in determining eligibility decisions for special education services, especially when evaluating students under certain categories such as autism spectrum disorder, emotional disturbance, or other health impairment (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). More in depth descriptions of each category are provided below.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects different aspects of an individual's life, including how they communicate, learn, and interact with others (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Anderson et al., 2021). It is considered a "spectrum" because it affects each person differently, some experience mild challenges that barely impact daily life, while others face more significant functional impairments. Some students may have trouble speaking or understanding others, while others might avoid eye contact, have limited interests, or follow routines in a certain pattern (Åsberg Johnels et al., 2019; Maanum, 2009). When identifying for autism spectrum disorder, it is very important to take into consideration the individual's culture, gender, and contextual factors during diagnosis, as symptoms can present differently across diverse backgrounds (Anderson et al., 2021).

Deaf-Blindness

Students classified with deaf-blindness experience both significant hearing and vision impairments, which often result in serious challenges with communication, mobility, and overall development. The dual sensory loss must be medically documented and substantially hinder the student's ability to acquire information (IDEA, 2004; Maanum, 2009). Because of the compound nature of these disabilities, students with deaf-blindness typically require specialized tools and support such as tactile sign language, assistive technology, or personalized help from teachers to participate in learning and school activities effectively (Maanum, 2009).

Deafness

Deafness is defined as a profound hearing impairment that significantly limits a student's ability to process spoken language, even with amplification devices such as hearing aids. Students who are deaf often rely on visual modes of communication, including American Sign

Language (ASL), cued speech, or captioned media (Maanum, 2009; National Deaf Center on

Postsecondary Outcomes, n.d.)

Hearing Impairments

Hearing Impairments refer to a partial loss of hearing that may be permanent or fluctuate

over time, but is not as severe as deafness. Students with hearing impairments may struggle to

process spoken language clearly, especially in loud environments or when speech is quiet

(Maanum, 2009). This can affect the development of speech, language, and social skills without

appropriate early intervention (IDEA, 2004). Students may use assistive tools such as hearing

aids, Frequency Modulation (FM) systems, or captioned media to help support their learning.

Additionally, students with hearing impairments may benefit from accommodations like speech-

language services, preferential seating, the assistance of a note-taker, appropriate lighting, and

the use of sign-language, depending on individual needs (Maanum, 2009).

Emotional Disturbance

Emotional disturbance encompasses a range of mental health challenges that significantly

interfere with a student's ability to learn and succeed in school. Students with emotional

disturbance display inappropriate behaviors or emptions under normal circumstances, struggle to

build or maintain relationships, or experience heightened feelings of unhappiness or depression

(IDEA, 2004; Maanum, 2009). These students might feel extremely anxious, sad, or may act out

in class, and some may be diagnosed with conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders,

bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia (Maanum, 2009; Scardamalia et al., 2019). Educators must be

prepared to implement individualized behavioral intervention plans and collaborate effectively

with mental health professionals due to the complex nature of these emotional and behavior

needs to support the student's academic and social-emotional development (Maanum, 2009).

Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability, formerly referred to as Mental Retardation, describes students with significantly below-average cognitive functioning and challenges in adaptive behaviors such as self-care, communication, and daily living tasks (Cluley, 2018; IDEA, 2004). These students often require specialized supposed focused on life skills, functional academics, and social development to help them succeed both inside and outside of school (Cluley, 2018; Maanum, 2009)

Multiple Disabilities

This classification applies to when a student has two or more impairments, that together create severe educational challenges requiring extensive specialized supports (IDEA, 2004; Maanum, 2009). These challenges cannot be adequately addressed by accommodating only one of the impairments. Students with multiple disabilities often need individualized interventions provided from a multidisciplinary team, including physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists, to support their learning and development (Rogers & Johnson, 2018). These students typically require significant assistance from various teachers and therapists to participate fully in educational activities due to the significance of their needs (Maanum 2009; Rogers & Johnson, 2018).

It is also important to recognize that while a student may be dually identified with two or more disabilities, this does not automatically qualify under the classification of multiple disabilities. According to IDEA, a student is only classified under multiple disabilities when the combination of impairments causes severe educational needs that cannot be accommodated in a program designed for just one of the disabilities alone (IDEA, 2004). In contrast, dual

identification simply means the student qualifies under two separate disability categories without meeting the criteria for multiple disabilities classification.

Orthopedic Impairments

Orthopedic impairments refer to the physical disabilities caused by congenital anomalies (e.g., deformity), diseases (e.g., muscular dystrophy), or other conditions such as cerebral palsy or amputations (Maanum, 2009). These impairments limit a student's mobility, strength, or motor coordination, impacting access to educational opportunities. Students with orthopedic impairments often require accommodations like adaptive seating, assistive technology, modified physical education plans, or mobility aids such as wheelchairs or special equipment to support their learning (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009).

Other Health Impairments

Other health impairments include a wide range of chronic or acute medical conditions that limit a student's alertness, strength, or vitality, therefore affecting academic performance. Examples include ADHD, epilepsy, diabetes, heart conditions, asthma, and leukemia (Hodge & Asola, 2019). ADHD is one of the most commonly identified conditions within this category and is characterized by inattentiveness, impulsivity, and hyperactivity (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009; Maanum, 2009). To qualify under other health impairment, the condition must impact the student's ability to succeed in school. Students with other health impairment often benefit from structured routines, frequent breaks, and behavioral supports to enhance their learning (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009; Hodge & Asola, 2019).

Specific Learning Disability

Specific learning disability is the most common disability category under IDEA, affecting nearly 32 percent of students receiving special education services (NCES, 2024). It refers to

disorders in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language (Mehta, 2006). Students with Specific learning disability typically have average intelligence but experience significant difficulties in specific academic areas such as reading, writing, or mathematics (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009). Students may experience difficulties in one or multiple areas, which can affect their ability to process information in certain subjects, even though they have typical cognitive abilities.

Speech or Language Impairments

This category includes difficulties in communication that negatively impact a student's academic performance. These impairments involve articulation issues (e.g., difficulty pronouncing sounds), fluency disorders (e.g., stuttering), voice disorders, or challenges with understanding and using language. Students may struggle to speak clearly, express themselves appropriately, or comprehend what others are saying. To qualify for services, the impairment must significantly impact their educational success (IDEA, 2004; Maanum, 2009). Speech-language pathologists are essential members of the educational team, providing assessment and targeted interventions to support students' language development (Georgan et al., 2023).

Traumatic Brain Injury

Traumatic brain injury is defined as an acquired injury to the brain caused by external physical force. For example, a car accident, fall, or act of violence results in partial or total functional disability or psychosocial impairment (Utley et al., 2019). This condition may affect a student's memory, attention, cognitive processing, movement, and even emotional regulation. Unlike congenital or degenerative brain disorders, traumatic brain injury occurs after birth. Students with traumatic brain injury often require highly individualized education programming that involves collaboration among healthcare providers, families, and school personnel (Cohen &

Spenciner, 2009). These students may need varied supports to help them access learning and manage long-term effects of their injury.

Visual Impairment (Including Blindness)

Visual impairment encompasses both partial and sight blindness that negatively affect education performance, even when correct lenses are used (IDEA, 2004). Students with visual impairments may need accommodations such as braille materials, screen readers, magnifiers, or orientation and mobility services to support their learning. Using assistive technologies, adapted materials, and individualized instruction strategies that address the unique needs of each student is crucial for students with visual impairments. (Kamei-Hannan & Ricci, 2015). Importantly, visual impairments do no impact intelligence, and with the right tools and supports, these students can achieve grade-level standards comparable to their peers (Maanum, 2009).

Legal and Policy Context

Laws and policies related to special education play a major role in how schools support students with disabilities. One of the most important legal requirements is that students should be taught in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which generally means alongside their classmates in a general education classroom to the maximum extent appropriate, where they are most likely to succeed (IDEA, 2004). However, if a student requires additional support, services may be provided in a special education setting based on what will best meet that student's individual needs. This idea has led to a stronger focus on inclusive education, which is generally understood as teaching students with disabilities in general education classrooms with the help and services they need (Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024). Although IDEA does not provide a specific definition for inclusion, scholars and educators have offered different interpretations. For instance, inclusion involves not just placing diverse or differently-abled students in the same

classroom, but actively adjusting instruction and the environment so all learners, regardless of socioeconomic status, language, culture, ability, gender, or background, can learn, contribute, and thrive together (Kaur & Bhatia, 2024). Additionally, under IDEA, the IEP team must first consider placement in the general education classroom with supplementary supports and may only opt for a more restrictive setting if the student is unable to make meaningful progress despite receiving appropriate supports (Johnson et al., 2022).

Inclusion is not just about where a student learns, but how they are supported in learning. It is a comprehensive educational approach and a legal right that promotes access, equity, and participation for all students. It also does not replace special education services. Instead, it encourages general and special education teachers to work together to meet students' individual needs (Bahr et al., 2024). Understanding these legal foundations and the different ways inclusion is defined is important, especially for general education teachers who are expected to teach students with a wide range of learning needs in today's classrooms. The following sections will explore the key components of the special education process, including non-discriminatory evaluation, eligibility determination, IEP development and implementation, and critical laws that shape inclusion and educator responsibilities.

The Special Education Process

Before a student can receive special education services, there are a few steps that must happen first. These steps are part of a process set by IDEA, which is a law that makes sure students with disabilities get the education and support they need to succeed in school. Understanding how this process works is important because general education teachers are often the first ones to notice when a student is struggling. This process includes five main parts: referral, evaluations, eligibility determination, IEP development and implementation, and

periodic review and reevaluation. Each step is designed to make sure students are treated fairly and given the help they need to succeed in school.

1. **Referral**

The special education process begins when a student is referred for an evaluation to see if they need special education services, Usually, this happens because a teacher notices the student is having trouble learning even after trying different teaching strategies. Teachers spend a lot of time with students in the learning environment, therefore, they are the first to notice if something is not working or if a student is struggling. However, parents, school principals, or other school staff can also request an evaluation if they have concerns about a student's learning. The referral is the first important step in identifying students who may need special education, and it helps ensure that no student's needs are overlooked (Pierangelo et al., 2007). After the referral, special education staff take over to make sure everything happens on time and follows the law (Maanum, 2009).

2. **Evaluations**

Once the referral is made and the parents give consent, the student undergoes a series of assessments to determine eligibility for special education services. These evaluations must be conducted fairly and without bias related to race, culture, or language to ensure accurate identification of the student's needs (IDEA, 2004; Maanum, 2009). The assessments use different methods, like standardized achievement tests, cognitive assessments, observations, and other measures to provide a comprehensive understanding of the student's abilities and challenges (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009; Kaur & Bhatia, 2024). These tests are typically administered by a team of professionals, including school psychologists, special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and other specialists depending on the student's needs.

This thorough evaluation process helps to guarantee that decisions about eligibility and services are based on valid and reliable data.

3. Eligibility Determination

After the assessments are completed, a team including: teachers, parents, a Local Education Agency (LEA) representative, special education professionals, and other relevant specialists meet to decide if the student qualifies for special education under IDEA (IDEA, 2024). The student must meet the criteria for one of the 13 disability categories as defined by IDEA and APA (2022). Additionally, the disability must adversely affect the student's educational performance and require specialized instruction (Cluley, 2018; Colker, 2013).

Parents receive the evaluation results before the meeting and have the right to request an independent evaluation if they disagree with the findings (PaTTAN, 2019). If the parents' consent to services, the team will develop an IEP. The IEP includes goals, accommodations, and is designed to meet the student's specific needs (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009; Maanum, 2009). This helps make sure the student receives appropriate support to access and succeed in the general education curriculum (Anderson et al., 2021; Bahr et al., 2024).

4. IEP Development and Implementation

If the student is determined eligible, the next step is to create an IEP, which is a plan made just for that student (IDEA, 2004). The IEP outlines the student's learning goals, the special education services they will receive, and any necessary modifications or accommodations to instruction (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009; Maanum, 2009). General education teachers play a critical role in developing the IEP because they provide insight into the student's performance within the regular classroom and collaborate to determine the most effective supports (Bahr et al., 2024; Kaur & Bhatia, 2024). After the IEP is finalized and parents provide consent, the

school is required to implement the plan immediately and continuously monitor the student's

progress, making adjustments as needed, to ensure access to the general education curriculum

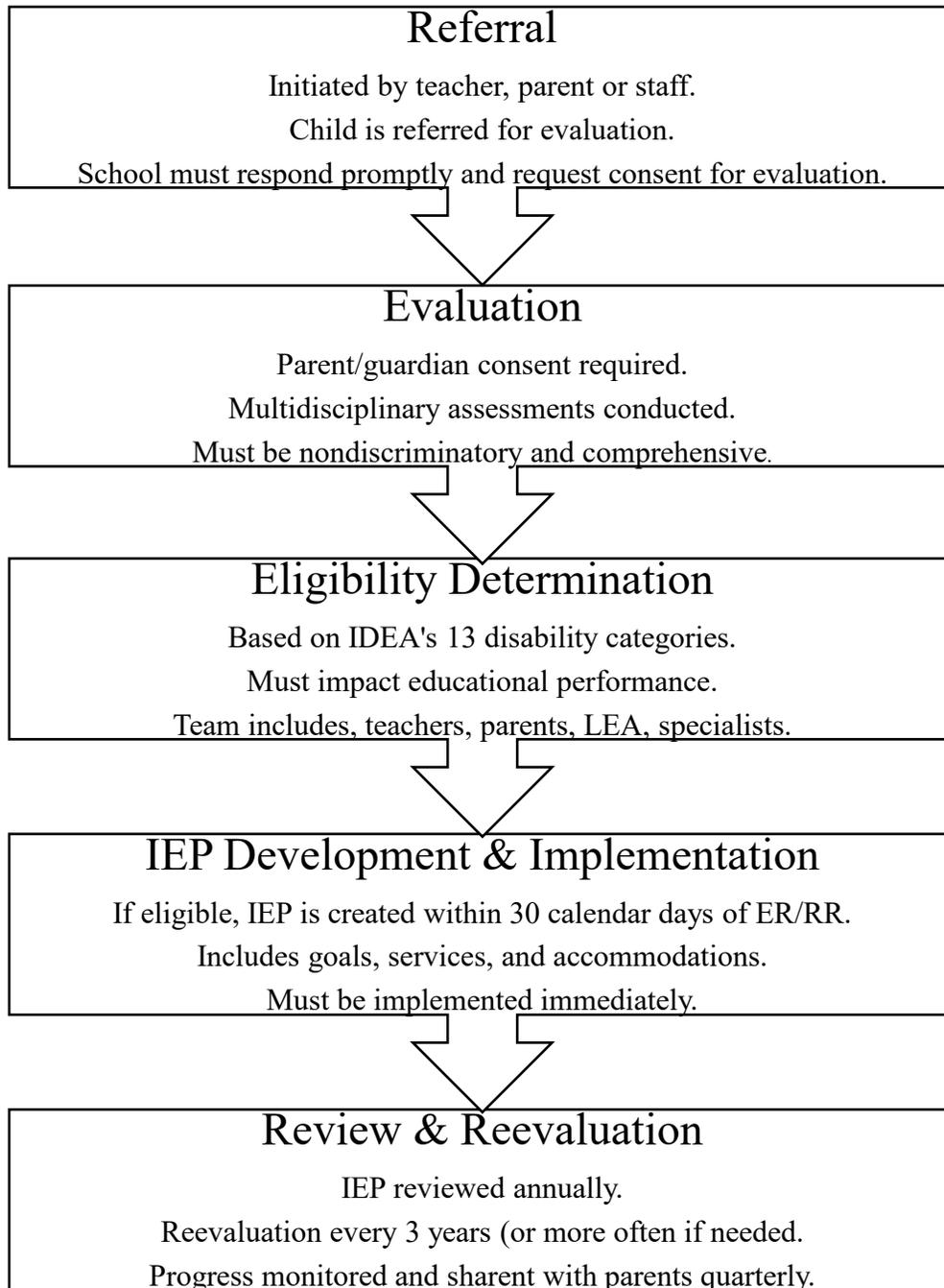(Anderson et al. 2021; Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024).

5. **Periodic Review and Reevaluation**

        After the IEP is created and implemented, it must be regularly reviewed to ensure it is

meeting the student's needs. The IEP team is required to meet at least once a year to assess the

student's progress, adjust goals, and revise the plan as needed; this is known as the annual review

(IDEA, 2004). In addition, a full reevaluation must occur every three years, or more frequently,

if necessary, to determine whether the student still qualifies for special education services and

whether adjustments in supports or placement are needed (PaTTAN, 2019). Between meetings,

student progress toward IEP goals must be monitored regularly and reported to parents, typically

on a quarterly basis, so families stay informed and involved. In some cases, such as when a

student is struggling to meet benchmarks or receiving more intensive support, progress may be

reported more frequently, depending on the IEP team's decisions (Maanum, 2009). These

periodic evaluations are important for ensuring the services remain appropriate for the student's

development and emerging needs. (Coker, 2013; Maanum, 2009). For example, ongoing

assessment is particularly important for students with evolving conditions such as autism

spectrum disorder or traumatic brain injury, where needs can shift significantly over time

(Anderson et al., 2021; Utley et al., 2019).

        The following figure provides a visual representation of the key steps in the special

education process. It clearly illustrates the procedures of referral, evaluation, eligibility

determination, IEP development and implementation, and periodic review and reevaluation.

Figure 2.1

Overview of the Special Education Process (Blugis, 2026)

Referral

Initiated by teacher, parent or staff.

Child is referred for evaluation.

School must respond promptly and request consent for evaluation.

Evaluation

Parent/guardian consent required.

Multidisciplinary assessments conducted.

Must be nondiscriminatory and comprehensive.

Eligibility Determination

Based on IDEA's 13 disability categories.

Must impact educational performance.

Team includes, teachers, parents, LEA, specialists.

IEP Development & Implementation

If eligible, IEP is created within 30 calendar days of ER/RR.

Includes goals, services, and accommodations.

Must be implemented immediately.

Review & Reevaluation

IEP reviewed annually.

Reevaluation every 3 years (or more often if needed.

Progress monitored and sharent with parents quarterly.

Key Laws Shaping Inclusion and Educator Responsibilities

There are a few important laws that explain how schools should include and support

students with disabilities. These laws make sure students with disabilities are treated fairly and

get the support they need to learn in the regular education environment to the fullest extent

possible. The three main laws are IDEA, Section 504, and Americans with Disabilities Act

(ADA). Although IDEA and Section 504 were already mentioned in the *Historical Overview of*

Special Education Law section of this study, they are still very important today. Not only did

they help pave the way for students with disabilities, but they also remain highly impactful and

continue to guide educational practices and policies (Colker, 2013; National Council on

Disability, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Each law plays a critical role in how

schools support students with disabilities (Nathanson, 2008; National Deaf Center on

Postsecondary Outcomes, n.d.).

IDEA is the main law for special education. It says that every student with a disability

has the right to FAPE in the LRE (IDEA, 2004). This means students should be placed in regular

education classrooms with their peers to the maximum extent possible. When additional support

is needed, IDEA ensures that individualized services are provided to help students succeed

through their IEP (Colker, 2013; Johnston et al., 2022; Maanum, 2009). Although IDEA does not

explicitly use the term "inclusion," its goal is to promote learning alongside general education

peers whenever possible.

Another law that protects the rights of students with disabilities is Section 504 of the

Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This civil rights law ensures that students with any physical or

mental impairment that severely limits one or more major life activities are not discriminated

against in schools that receive federal funding (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2024;

U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Unlike IDEA, which applies only to students who meet

specific criteria for special education services, Section 504 has a broader definition of disability

supports who may not qualify for an IEP but still need accommodations to access the general

education curriculum (Colker, 2013; Maanum, 2019; Turnbull et al., 2019). For example, a student with ADHD or anxiety might receive a 504 Plan that allows for extended time on tests, access to a quiet testing environment, or frequent breaks throughout the day to help manage symptoms. These accommodations help the student so they can participate and succeed in the general education setting. Section 504 helps schools make sure every student's needs are considered and that everyone gets a fair chance to succeed in school. This law plays an important role in fostering inclusive education learning environments (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Smith, et al. 2015).

ADA was passed in 1990 and it is another important law that protects the rights of people with disabilities. It ensures that students with disabilities have the same opportunities to attend school and participate in all activities as their peers. Schools must make their buildings accessible by providing things like tamps and elevators, and they have to make sure students can join sports teams, clubs, fieldtrips, as well as any other in school or after school activity (Colker, 2013; National Council on Disability, 2003; U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). ADA goes beyond schools by requiring fair treatment for people with disabilities in jobs, public places, transportation, and other areas of daily life (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Smith et al., 2015). This law helps remove barriers so everyone can be included and have equal access.

These three laws support inclusion by making sure students with disabilities are really part of the classroom. That means they are not just sitting there in the classroom, but actually taking part in learning. It is about giving them the appropriate tools, changing lessons to fit how they learn best, and making sure each student's unique needs are met (Colker, 2013). These laws also mean that general education teachers, not just special education teachers, are responsible for helping students with disabilities. General education teachers have to follow what is written in

IEPs and 504 Plans, work together with other staff and families, and use teaching strategies that include all students (Bahr et al., 2024). Overall, these laws are really important for making schools fairer and more supportive. They do not just tell schools what to do, they also remind teachers that they have a legal and moral responsibility to help every student learn and feel included (Maanum, 2009).

Common Challenges Faced by General Education Teachers

General education teachers often face many challenges when supporting diverse learners in inclusive classrooms. These challenges include limited training and professional development, time constraints, and managing difficult behaviors (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019). Access to necessary resources and support is often sufficient, which can make it harder for teachers to meet their students' needs (Lindacher, 2020; Tiwari, 2024). Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion also influence how they carry out inclusive practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Knouse, 2018) In addition, unclear policies and inconsistent support from school leadership add to these difficulties (Al Jaffal, 2022; Knouse, 2018). Understanding these challenges is important for improving inclusion efforts and better supporting teachers. This section explores these specific challenges in detail with regard to existing literature.

Lack of Training and Professional Development

One of the biggest challenges general education teachers face in teaching in inclusive classrooms is not having enough training when it comes to students with disabilities (Bateman & Cline, 2016). Many teachers go through college programs to focus mostly on teaching students without disabilities (Maanum, 2009). As a result, they do not learn how to implement IEPs, make accommodations or modifications, or adjust lessons for students who need extra help (Goldstein et al., 2013; Turnbull et al., 2019).

After years of teaching, many educators do not get the professional development they need to feel confident in inclusive classrooms. When training is offered, it is often short, too general, or not directly related to what teachers actually face in their classrooms (Apitz et al., Bahr et al., 2024). Generic or online professional development is often viewed as ineffective; instead, teachers prefer in-person, scenario-based training that reflects the real-life challenges they encounter in their classrooms (Brownell et al., 2010). Some schools wait to offer support until a teacher is already struggling, which does not help build long-term success. Teachers also report not getting enough guidance on how to work with special education staff, use assistive technology, or adapt instruction to meet individual needs (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009; Kaur & Bhatia, 2024).

The literature shows this lack of preparation has serious consequences. Teachers who do not feel ready to support students with disabilities often feel more stressed, less effective, and less satisfied with their job (Smith et al., 2015; Tiwari, 2024). This can lead to burnout or even teachers leaving the profession. For students, it means they might not get the support they need to succeed. Without properly trained teachers, the goals of inclusion in making sure all students learn together and are supported, cannot truly be met (Colker, 2013).

To fix this problem, experts say teacher training needs to change. Colleges should teach future teachers more about inclusion from the start (Al Jaffal, 2022). School districts should also provide regular, hands-on professional development that matches what teachers face every day (Apitz et al., 2017). When training includes real classroom examples, teamwork between general and special education teachers, and mentoring, both teachers and students benefit (Turnbull et al., 2019). In the end, giving teachers the tools they need is one of the most important steps toward making inclusion work for everyone.

Time Constraints and Workload

General education teachers often struggle to balance the demands of teaching students with and without disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The extra time needed for individualized lesson planning, attending IEP meetings, and completing extensive documentation can greatly increase their workload (Apitz et al., 2017; Goldstein et al., 2013). These tasks frequently extend beyond regular classroom hours, leading to feelings of overwhelm and stress (Smith et al., 2015; Tiwari, 2024).

Apitz et al. (2017) explain that planning lessons for students with significant disabilities requires careful preparation to meet diverse learning needs, which often conflicts with the time available for general classroom duties. Similarly, Goldstein et al. (2013) highlight that many general educators feel they lack the time and expertise needed to navigate IEP processes and collaborate effectively with special education staff, further complicating their workload.

The workload challenges are made worse by systematic issues such as limited professional support, as well as scarce resources, which reduce teachers' ability to manage these responsibilities efficiently (Al Jaffal, 2022; Bahr et al., 2024). Without sufficient time or administrative support, these demands can harm teacher effectiveness and well-being, which ultimately affects the quality of inclusion for students (Turnbull et al., 2019).

Classroom Management and Behavior Issues

General education teachers often face big challenges when it comes to managing classroom behavior, especially in inclusive classrooms that have students with and without disabilities. Students with disabilities may have very different needs and behaviors, which can make it hard for one teacher to manage the whole class while also supporting every student's learning (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Turnbill et al., 2019). These behavior challenges are not just

about students misbehaving, rather, they can be caused by disabilities such as autism, emotional

disturbance, ADHD, or other health impairments that affect how a student reacts, communicates,

or is focused (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Hodge & Asola, 2019).

For example, students with autism might struggle with changes in routine or have trouble

understanding social cues, which can lead to behavior that interrupts classroom learning (Al

Jaffal, 2022; Anderson et al., 2021). Teachers may not always understand these behaviors,

especially if they have not received enough training about autism or behavior supports (Apits et

al., 2017; Åsberg Johnels et al., 2019). In fact, Al Jaffal (2022) found that many teachers felt

unsure about how to support students with autism in classrooms, especially when behaviors were

unpredictable or hard to manage.

In addition, teachers sometimes face challenges when students show signs of emotional

disturbance. These students may act out, shut down, or become upset very quickly, making it

hard to keep the classroom calm and focused (Scardamalia et al., 2019). The process for

identifying emotional disturbance in students can be confusing and inconsistent from one school

to another, which can leave general education teachers without the help and support they need

(Brownell et al., 2010; Georgan et al., 2023)

Some teachers try to manage these challenges by using their own behavior systems or

classroom routines. However, these strategies do not always work for every student and may not

follow school-wide rules or evidence-based practices (Cohen & Spenciner, 2009; Smith et al.,

2015). Without the help of a special education teacher or behavior specialist, general education

teachers may feel frustrated or overwhelmed. Lindacher (2020) explains that in co-taught

classrooms, teachers do better when they share responsibilities, especially when it comes to

managing students' behavior. When co-teachers work as a team, students receive more consistent support (Rogers & Johnson, 2018).

Behavior problems can also make it more difficult for students with disabilities to stay in general education classrooms. If teachers are not trained in how to support these students, they may be removed from class or placed in more restrictive settings, which goes against the goal of inclusion (Colker, 2013; Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024; IDEA, 2004; Tiwari, 2024).

Access to Resources and Support

One of the biggest challenges general education teachers face in inclusive classrooms is not having enough resources and support. These supports include paraprofessionals (also called aides), special education teachers, adaptive materials, and tools like assistive technology. When schools do not provide enough of these, it becomes more difficult for teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Goldstein et al., 2013; Turnbull et al., 2019). In many cases, schools want to support inclusive education but are held back by limited budgets and staff shortages (Colker, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Paraprofessionals play a key role in helping students stay focused, understand lessons, and follow behavior plans. They often assist students in one-on-one or in small groups, providing academic, behavioral, or social support. However, many schools lack an appropriate number of paraprofessionals, or the ones they do have are not trained well to work with students with disabilities (Maanum, 2009; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). According to Smith et al. (2015), this puts extra pressure on general education teachers, who end up having to divide their attention among all students without enough help. This can make it harder to teach effectively and can lead to frustration for both students and teachers.

Similarly, many schools are facing a shortage of qualified special education teachers. These teachers are supposed to work closely with general education teachers to plan lessons, co-teach, provide guidance, and give extra support to students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2010; DeSutter & LeMire, 2016). When special educators are stretched too thin, they are unable to give students the attention they need, as well as plan effectively with general education teachers. Lindacher (2020) found that when co-teachers lack ample time to plan together, their roles become confusing, and instruction becomes inconsistent. Effective co-teaching requires shared responsibility and preparation time, which is hard to achieve without strong support from school administrators (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Cohen & Spenciner, 2009).

Beyond staffing, many teachers lack the appropriate materials and tools to support students with disabilities. This includes things like large print books, voice-to-text software, specialized seating, and visual aids (Apitz et al., 2017; Cohen & Spenciner, 2009). Kamei-Hannan and Ricci (2015) noted that students with visual impairments do better when they have access to these kinds of adaptive materials. However, the National Center for Education Statistic (2024) reported that many schools lack the funding to purchase these tools. Teachers may want to help, but without proper materials, it becomes difficult to meet every student's needs. In some cases, teachers end up buying supplies with their own money, which is not a sustainable solution (Goldstein et al., 2013).

When resources are limited, it negatively affects instructional quality. Teachers may be forced to use a one-size-fits-all approach because they do not have the tools, time, or support to change lessons for different learning needs (Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Tiwari, 2024). As a result, students with disabilities may be physically present in the classroom, but not truly included in the learning. Iarskaia-Smirnova et al. (2024) argue that this kind of inclusion allows for students

with disabilities to be present in the classroom, but they are not fully participating or learning at the same level as their peers. True inclusion requires more than just physical presence, moreover, it requires access, engagement, and support that schools must actively provide (Hehir et al., 2016).

This lack of support impacts not only students, but teachers too. Many educators who feel overwhelmed when they do not have the staff or tools they need can lead to stress, burnout, and may even leave the profession altogether (Apitz et al., 2017; Goldstein et al., 2013). Bahr et al. (2024) found that when teachers are given time and resources to collaborate, student outcomes improve, and teachers feel more confident in their work. Providing resources also helps retain experienced teachers and creates a more stable, support learning environment for everyone (Ingersoll, 2001).

Federal laws are supposed to ensure students with disabilities get the support they need in school. However, even though such laws exist, many schools are limited by school budgets and are unable to provide the staffing and funding to follow through on them fully. (Colker, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Giving teachers the resources and support they need is essential for making inclusion work. Without them, even the most dedicated teachers cannot give students with disabilities the support they need to succeed (Pijl & Pijl, n.d.; Tiwari, 2024; Turnbull et al., 2019). As inclusion becomes more common in public schools, ensuring that all teachers are equipped with proper support will be one of the most important steps in improving education for all students.

Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs

Teachers' feelings and thoughts about inclusion affect how well it works in the classrooms. Many teachers know that including students with disabilities helps them learn with

their classmates and make friends (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019; Tiwari, 2024). When teachers have a good attitude about inclusion, they are more willing to change their lessons and try different ways to help all students learn (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Greenidge, 2019; Tiwari, 2024).

On the other hand, some teachers are indecisive about inclusion. They think students with disabilities might need special classes outside of the regular education classroom (Al Jaffal, 2022; Bateman & Cline, 2016; Greenidge, 2019). This can make teachers less willing to fully support inclusion or work with special education teachers (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019; Tiwari, 2024). Many teachers worry about having more work, not enough training, and not enough support from the school (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019; Lindacher, 2020; Tiwari, 2024).

Some research shows teachers face real challenges with inclusion. For example, Knouse (2018) found that some teachers worry that students with disabilities might affect the other students' feeling and learning. Another study from Walden University (2019) said that teachers' opinions about inclusion can be very different depending on their experience and training. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) explain that to teach inclusively, teachers need to think different about how they teach. Instead of seeing differences as problems, they should see them as chances to help all students learn better. This way of thinking helps teachers have better attitudes about inclusion.

Additionally, veteran teachers may have different views on inclusion because they were training in a time when educational approaches were very different. These teachers can be more set in their ways, making it harder for them to change their mindset toward inclusive practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Knouse, 2018; Lindacher, 2020). This can be challenging

because new methods and best teaching practices are constantly evolving to better support all students, especially in inclusive classrooms (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019).

What teachers believe about inclusion affects how they teach. Teachers who do not support inclusion may have lower expectations for students with disabilities and might not provide them with enough opportunities to succeed (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Greenidge, 2019). On the other hand, teachers with a positive attitude work better with others and change their teaching to help every student succeed (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Greenidge, 2019; Tiwari, 2024)

The school environment also matters. Schools that support teachers with training, teamwork, and good leadership help teachers feel more positive about inclusion (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019; Lindacher, 2020). Still, if teachers feel alone or stressed, they might be reluctant to try inclusive teaching (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019; Knouse, 2018; Lindacher, 2020).

Administrative and Policy Challenges

General education teachers often face challenges because their school leaders do not provide clear guidance or consistent support on how to implement inclusion effectively. When principals or administrators do not explain inclusion policies clearly or reinforce them across classrooms, teachers can feel confused about their roles (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019; Lindacher, 2020). This confusion leads to varied approaches to inclusion, which is unfair to students with disabilities and makes it harder to ensure equal learning opportunities for all (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Knouse, 2018)

Occasionally, school leaders themselves lack enough training or resources to guide teachers properly on inclusive practices. Without this support, teachers struggle to access the

training or materials they need, leaving them feeling like they have to figure things out alone (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Greenidge, 2019; Knouse, 2018; Tiwari, 2024). When policies are unclear or poorly communicated, teachers may find it difficult to advocate for necessary accommodations or services, adding stress to their workload (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019).

In addition, even when inclusion policies exist, they are not always consistently reinforced or backed up with ongoing support. Some schools may have inclusive policies on paper but fail to provide the training, resources, or leadership needed to put them into practice effectively (Al Jaffal, 2022; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This gap leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed, unsupported, and less willing to fully engage in inclusive teaching strategies like co-teaching (Knouse, 2018; Lindacher, 2020; Tiwari, 2024).

Research shows that school leadership and climate play a big role in how teachers experience inclusion. When school leaders clearly communicate expectations, offer professional development, and encourage teamwork, teachers tend to feel more confident and positive about inclusion (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Greenidge, 2019). Weak leadership and unclear rules can make things harder for teachers and cause a lot of stress and burnout (Knouse, 2018; Lindacher, 2020). Clear, consistent policies combined with strong leadership, regular training, and open communication can help teachers feel supported and better prepared to implement inclusion. This leads to improved outcomes for all students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tiwari, 2024).

Impact of Inclusion on Student Outcomes

Inclusive education can have a big effect on how students with disabilities learn, how they interact with others, how they feel, and how they act. Inclusion allows students to follow the general education curriculum, helps them get along with their classmates, and makes it easier for

them to learn with their nondisabled peers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Hehir et al., 2016). Studies show that students with disabilities in inclusive settings often do better in school, getting better grades, being more interested in learning, and making better friends than students with disabilities in separate classrooms (Hehir et al., 2016; Tiwari, 2024). Inclusion also helps students get the help they need, especially when teachers use strategies like differentiated instruction and classroom accommodations (Bahr et al., 2024; Bateman & Cline, 2016; Tiwari, 2024).

Socially, inclusive classrooms help disabled students make friends, talk to other students more easily, and feel like they are really part of the class. Daily interactions with peers lessen stigma and enhance the likelihood of being perceived as equal and competent by classmates (Åsberg Johnels et al., 2019; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Students without disabilities also benefit socially from learning to work with people who are different from their peers. This helps them develop important life skills like empathy, patience, and teamwork (Knouse, 2018). Students in inclusive classrooms often feel more confident and supported when it comes to their feelings. Being in a general education setting, especially when teachers and classmates are friendly, can help students feel good about themselves and like they belong (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Utley et al., 2019). These emotional benefits can last a long time and affect how motivated and engaged they are in school.

In terms of behavior, inclusion has been linked to fewer behavior problems and better behavior in the classroom. Students with disabilities are more likely to follow the rules in class, stay on task, and not act out if they get the right help (Tiwari, 2024). When students know what is expected of them, get regular help with their behavior, and their teachers use teaching methods that include everyone, they can better handle their feelings and actions.

Inclusive education is beneficial for a wider range of students beyond those with disabilities. Their peers who do not have disabilities also learn important skills (Valentino, 2016). When students are in a class with people from different backgrounds, they learn to be more tolerant, open-minded, and good at solving problems. It also helps them get ready for a world where there are a lot of different kinds of people (Knouse, 2018).

Being included does not mean someone will do well. Inclusion can fail if schools do not give students the right training, help, or tools. In these situations, students with disabilities might face academic difficulties, behavioral problems, or feelings of isolation (Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024; Lindacher, 2020; Knouse, 2018). Some students may lose interest in school, get discouraged, or even drop out completely if their needs are not met (Hehir et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2015).

To make sure every student does well in an inclusive classroom, teachers need proper training, the right tools, and support from their school (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019; Tiwari, 2024). Inclusion works best when everyone in the school is on the same page and helps create a supportive environment for all students, no matter their abilities.

Gaps in Literature, Implications for Practice and Future Research

Even though there is a lot of research that shows how inclusion helps and explains the laws supporting it, there are still important things we do not know about how general education teachers experience inclusion every day. A lot of research looks at what administrators or special education teachers think, but not enough looks at what general education teachers think. These teachers are the ones who have to do the inclusive teaching, and they do not always get enough training in special education (Apitz et al., 2017; DeSutter & LeMire, 2016; Tiwari, 2024). There

is a big gap here because general teachers are very important for inclusion to work well (Al

Jaffal, 2022).

Another gap is that not much research looks at how inclusion works in different kinds of

schools, like rural, suburban, or urban schools. Teachers in schools with fewer resources or more

poverty may face unique challenges that are not extensively researched (Lindacher, 2020;

Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013). There is not a lot of research about including students with

different types of disabilities or in different grade levels. Many studies act like inclusion works

the same for every student, but students with intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioral

disorders, or multiple disabilities often need different kinds of support (Bateman & Cline, 2016;

Pijl & Pijl, n.d.).

Another new concern is how inclusion affects the health of teachers. It can be very

rewarding to teach students with disabilities, but it can also be very stressful and lead to burnout,

especially when teachers do not get enough help (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Brownell et al.,

2010; Smith et al., 2015). However, there are few studies that examine the impact of inclusion on

general education teachers' stress levels, job satisfaction, or their retention in the profession

(Greenidge, 2019).

Implications for practice include:

- Giving general education teachers more specific training before they start teaching and

  during their careers, especially about teaching inclusively and managing classrooms

  (Apitz et al., 2017; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

- Using co-teaching models that are consistent and well-supported so general and special

  education teachers can work well together (Magiera et al., 2005).

- Providing schools and classrooms with resources like paraprofessionals, assistive technology, and materials designed to be easy for all students to use (Bahr et al., 2024; Hehir et al., 2016).

- Creating an equitable and successful environment for students where teachers work together and are flexible (Utley et al., 2019).

Future research should:

- Look at how inclusion affects teacher retention and burnout over a long time, especially in schools with high needs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

- Conduct comprehensive case studies in both rural and urban educational institutions to enhance the understanding of how various environments influence inclusion (Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024; Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013).

- Investigate the efficacy of professional development programs that emphasize inclusive teaching and diverse pedagogical approaches (Brock & Carter, 2017).

- Find out how inclusion can change to support more disabilities and how those changes affect both students and teachers. (Lindacher, 2020; Tiwari, 2024).

- Research how administrators can support the mental and well-being of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms (Al Jaffal, 2022; Greenidge, 2019).

Chapter Two Summary

This chapter examined how special education has changed over time in the U.S., especially how inclusion is used in regular classrooms. It explained the 13 types of disabilities listed in IDEA, how the special education process works, and the main laws that help make inclusion happen. It also talked about the biggest problems that general education teachers have, like not having enough training, not enough time, trouble keeping students in line, and not

having enough help or resources. The chapter also talked about how inclusion affects how well students learn and where more research is still needed.

As inclusive education becomes more common, helping general education teachers is really important to make it work. Solving the problems they face can make teachers more effective and happier in their jobs, and it also makes sure students with disabilities get fair and meaningful chances to learn in regular classrooms. The next chapter will explain how the research was done to take a closer look at these teacher challenges.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Methodology

The research methodology used for this study is described in this chapter. Gaining a better understanding of the difficulties general education teachers encounter when teaching students with disabilities in elementary school settings was the primary objective. Teachers' firsthand accounts of their experiences in inclusive environments were gathered using a basic qualitative research design informed by grounded theory principles. This chapter describes the study's driving research questions, research design, who the participants were and how they were chosen, and where the study took place. It also describes how the data were collected and analyzed, the ethical rules that were followed, the timeline of the study, and the limitations that could affect the results. Overall, this chapter covers the plan for carrying out the research and collecting reliable information.

About the Researcher

The researcher is a doctoral candidate in Special Education at Slippery Rock University, with eight years working in the public-school setting. With a background in both general education and special education, the researcher's professional experience has been within the field of special education, while collaborating closely with general education teachers in inclusive settings. The researcher holds a Master's degree in Special Education. The researcher has taught in the roles of a learning support and emotional support teacher, and has taught students with a wide range of disabilities, including specific learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, visual impairments, other health impairments, emotional disturbance, intellectual disabilities, and speech or language impairments. In addition to working during the traditional school year, the researcher also teaches Extended School Year (ESY) during the

summer months, which provides continued support for students with disabilities. This hands-on experience has provided deep insight into the challenges and supports necessary for effective inclusive education. These experiences guided the development of the study and helped the researcher approach the interviews with understanding, empathy, and professional integrity.

Purpose

In order to better understand the effects of inclusion on teaching and learning, this study set out to investigate the experiences general education teachers have when working with students who have disabilities. Because of IDEA (2004), schools are supposed to teach students with disabilities in regular classrooms whenever they can. Research has shown there are many benefits of inclusion for special education students as well as general education students, socially, behaviorally, and academically (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Hehir et al., 2016). In each school district, inclusion varies from special education students spending limited time in general education classrooms (such as for lunch, specials, or selected activities), to being fully integrated in all aspects of the instruction and classroom environment alongside their non-disabled peers (Kaur & Bhatia, 2024). This study looked at a public rural elementary school in Northeastern Pennsylvania to see how inclusion works in this setting and how it affects both the teachers and the students.

Research Questions

There is a multitude of research in the field of education, and it continues to grow steadily. Inclusion has become a popular topic because more students with disabilities are learning in general education classrooms. Even though there is a lot of information out there, not much research focuses on how general education teachers feel about inclusion. This study

focused on finding answers to the following research questions about inclusion, as it relates to general education teachers:

Research Question(s)

This study was guided by the following research question:

Primary Research Question:

- What challenges do general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

Sub-questions:

- How do these challenges impact their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively?

- What types of support or resources do general education teachers report needing to better support students with disabilities?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used to explore the challenges faced by general education teachers in teaching students with disabilities. This study captured educators' perspectives on inclusion because it employed a qualitative descriptive design that focused on giving simple descriptions of participants' experiences, rather than attempting to develop theory or study culture (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Grounded theory methods were used to explore and analyze how general education teachers experienced and made sense of teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By focusing on their real-life experiences and feelings, the study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of what inclusion looked like in the study setting. Eight

general education teachers who worked in inclusive elementary classrooms were interviewed to shed light about the challenges they faced when teaching students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. These interviews provided in-depth, intimate insights directly from the educators. A strong qualitative study exhibits sincerity, credibility, and meaningful coherence, all of which this study accomplished through candid and deliberate interviews (Tracy, 2013). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) asserted that qualitative data is thorough and reliable. A deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by general education teachers in inclusive education environments was made possible by this grounded theory approach, which allowed for a rich investigation of their experiences.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory places a strong emphasis on letting participant voices directly reveal themes and insights. A grounded theory approach directed the data analysis process without imposing preconceived theories because the study examined a real-world problem in a real-world setting. This method ensured that the results stayed closely related to the teachers' real-world experiences.

Instrumentation

In order to better understand inclusion and general educators' perspectives, this study utilized semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The researcher developed the open-ended questionnaire through a multi-step process. First, a comprehensive review of existing literature on inclusive education, challenges faced by general education teachers, and qualitative research practices was conducted to identify key themes and areas of interest, drawing on established research in the field by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) and Creswell and Creswell (2018). These themes were then translated into clear, open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed responses and capture a broad range of experiences. The questions were

designed to align with the study's research questions and to elicit detailed responses about teachers' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to teaching students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

To ensure clarity and content validity, five educators who were not involved in the study participated in a pilot test of the interview instrument. Their feedback was used to revise wording, improve flow, and enhance the overall relevance of the questions. The final version of the interview instrument is provided in Appendix D. Additional details regarding the study population, sampling procedures, and data collection methods are provided in the sections below.

Participants and Procedures

This section explains the study's participants, selection process, and location. It also describes the selection criteria, sample size, and research environment. To put the findings in context, information about the school and the participating teachers is also included.

Target Population

Qualitative studies usually have fewer participants than quantitative ones because the goal is to really understand people's experiences and the situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Instead of trying to get large, generalizable samples, qualitative research focuses on getting deep, detailed, and rich data. Qualitative studies are used to find themes and patterns in what people say so the topic can be understood better (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

This study's target population consisted of approximately 10 to 15 general education teachers who taught grades K–6. Purposive sampling was used to make sure they met the requirements for teaching in inclusive classrooms, meaning they had at least one student with a disability. Grades K–6 was chosen because early learning is important, and inclusion can significantly shape how young students experience school. Including teachers with a variety of

educational backgrounds, teaching experiences, and grade-level assignments was important to ensure a broad range of perspectives. These differences helped capture the diverse ways general education teachers approached inclusion and navigated the challenges of teaching students with disabilities in K-6 classrooms. Teachers who did not work in inclusive classrooms were excluded from this study. Including educators with diverse backgrounds allowed for a broader understanding of whether specific barriers to effective inclusion existed across different demographics and teaching contexts.

Sampling Method

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria, and convenience sampling was also employed due to the researcher's ready access to the population. All general education teachers in grades K–6 were invited to participate. Qualitative research involves purposeful selection of individuals with the necessary characteristics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This sampling method ensured that participants had relevant, first-hand experience with inclusion, which was necessary to address the study's research questions.

Sample Size

The sample size of this study was eight educators. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) say that in qualitative studies, the number of participants should be enough to get detailed information and stop when no new ideas come up, not just a set number. Teachers were first asked to join the study by email. All participants were given informed consent forms to sign online. If they did not agree, they were excluded from the study. Teachers could ask questions and were free to drop out of the study at any time. Educators were given a ten-dollar Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate in the study.

Participants

Eight general education teachers that taught in inclusive settings were interviewed for this study. All participants taught elementary-age students in grades K–6 in the same elementary school building. Table 3.1 below provides details of each participant. Each participant's educational background ranged from bachelor's to doctorate degrees and included both new and veteran educators. The majority of teachers who participated were females, with the exception of one male. This was due to the elementary school's teaching population, which is made up of mostly females. All participants were currently teaching in an inclusive setting, each having at least one student with a disability in their classroom, with some having up to 17 students with disabilities as a departmentalized teacher, with the most being 7 in a classroom at one time.

Setting

This qualitative study took place in a rural public school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania, which served roughly 601 students in grades K–12. Approximately 42 percent of the student population was economically disadvantaged, making the district eligible to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of income. Twenty-three percent of students received special education services. The elementary school, which served students in grades K–6, was the specific focus of this study, even though the district had two schools, which included an elementary and junior/senior high school.

The elementary school had one building and was led by one principal. It employed about 17 classroom teachers (excluding specials teachers), with two to three per grade level. The elementary school had five special education teachers, including three learning support teachers, one life skills support teacher, and one K-12 itinerant emotional support teacher, along with approximately seven to eight paraprofessionals, varying yearly. The elementary school also shared specialized service providers (e.g., speech and language, occupational therapy, physical

therapy, vision support, and hearing support) with the high school. In the past twelve years, the

district had only had one English Language Learner enrolled.

Study Timeline

This study took place over approximately three months, from August 2025 through

November 2025. First, the researcher obtained permission from the superintendent in August,

followed by approval from the IRB in October. Next, general education teachers were invited to

participate, and interviews were scheduled in October. The actual interviews took place over a

two-week period in October, depending on teacher availability. After that, also in October, the

interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for review as part of the member checking

process, and the initial round of data analysis began in November. Finally, also in November, the

researcher completed the data analysis, wrote up the results, and prepared to share the findings.

This timeline was tentative and adjusted based on IRB approval, school schedules, and

participant availability.

Data Collection, Data Analysis, Presentation of Results

This section explains how the researcher gathered and examined the study's data. It

describes the process of interviewing teachers and obtaining their consent. It also describes how

the interviews were verified for accuracy and how the researcher used specialized computer

software to identify recurring themes in the responses. Lastly, it explains how the findings will

be disseminated while maintaining the privacy of the participants.

Data Collection

To conduct the study, a letter was sent to the school district's superintendent asking for

permission. After the superintendent approved it, another letter was sent to the elementary school

principal explaining the research process and purpose of the study. The principal had the chance

to ask questions to better understand the purpose of the study and how it would be conducted. Permission was also requested to conduct interviews via Zoom during the school day, but other times were offered if needed.

Teachers were asked to join the study by email. Everyone who participated received a consent form online. Each teacher chose a time that worked best for their interview. The researcher sent them a reminder email the day prior to their scheduled time. Teachers were reminded what the study was about and that their answers would be kept confidential.

Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and followed a set of open-ended, semi-structured questions (see Appendix D) that asked about the challenges of teaching in inclusive classrooms. With permission, the interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy and clarity, which Tracy (2013) emphasizes as essential for quality research. Teachers were also given a chance to review and correct their answers afterward, as part of the member checking process According to Tracy (2013), member checking enhances the authenticity of qualitative research by allowing participants to confirm that their perspectives had been accurately captured and to clarify and misunderstandings, thereby strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

Each Zoom meeting had a different link with a random ID and was password-protected. The interview transcripts were saved under pseudonyms on a password-protected computer that only the researcher can access. This data will be deleted three years after the study concludes. The signed consent forms are stored electronically in a secure, password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher and will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of the study.

Data Analysis

The researcher took field notes during each interview, while audio recordings were later transcribed verbatim. The data was then examined using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying patterns in descriptive data. This method involves coding the data and finding repeating themes and patterns (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The researcher first grouped and sorted the codes manually using Excel spreadsheets, and then used software to double-check and confirm the results. MAXQDA was the chosen program because it is widely used in education research and supports efficient management and analysis of qualitative data (Woods et al., 2016). MAXQDA is a qualitative data analysis software designed to help researchers efficiently organize, code, and analyze qualitative data (VERBI Software, n.d.). More information about the data analysis process will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Presentation of Results

The actual names of the participants were not used when sharing the results. The purpose of this study was to answer the research questions related to general education teacher's experiences with inclusion, as well as fulfill the requirements of the doctoral dissertation. The results were distributed electronically to interested parties. The results' implications for future professional development and district improvement decisions were presented to the administration, if requested. During any presentations to the school administration, the participants' identities would be kept confidential by using pseudonyms because they were employees.

Limitations

This study had some limitations that should be kept in mind when looking at the results. First, the sample size consisted of eight general education teachers from one rural elementary school, which limits the generalizability of the results. However, qualitative research is more

about understanding people's experiences deeply, not about making generalizable claims for everyone (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Second, the study only included general education teachers who worked in inclusive classrooms with students with disabilities in grades K–6. Teachers who taught specials, such as physical education, art, music, library, gifted programs, and specialists were not included in the study. This means some useful viewpoints about inclusion might have been missed. Also, the majority of the teachers who took part were female, with an exception of one male, because of the gender distribution in the school, which could limit the diversity of perspectives captured.

Third, the researcher was not employed by the school district and the teachers did not know them personally, which may have made some participants less comfortable during the interviews. However, this lack of personal connection also reduced the chances that teachers felt pressured to respond in a certain way. Still, some teachers might have felt influenced by social desirability bias, giving answers they believed would be viewed more favorably, even though they were assured their responses would remain confidential and anonymous.

Fourth, participants had different amounts of experience working with students with disabilities. Some had been teaching in inclusive classrooms for many years, and some for less than a year. This might have changed how they saw the challenges and what they shared; however, this also provides valuable insight into differences in teachers' perspectives on inclusion based on their years of experience.

Fifth, all interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom and lasted about 30 minutes. While doing interviews online made it easier to schedule, it might have been more difficult to build a connection and get detailed answers compared to meeting face-to-face. The short time

was chosen so teachers could take part without taking too much time out of their busy teaching schedules, and to ensure participation.

Sixth, the researcher manually reviewed the data and utilized a program called MAXQDA to assist in the analysis of the interviews. Despite this, it can still be challenging to interpret participants' responses, and the researcher's own perspective and experience may have an impact. To help with this, member checking was used so participants could check their transcripts to make sure their responses were accurate; however, some bias might be unavoidable.

Lastly, since this study was done in just one rural school in Pennsylvania, the results might not apply to schools in urban or suburban areas, or to schools in other geographical locations. Also, this study does not explore teachers who work with grade levels seven through twelve, as it only looked at elementary teachers in grades K-6.

Even with these limitations, the study helps to gain insight into the experiences of general education teachers who worked with students who have disabilities in inclusive classrooms within a rural elementary school setting. This information can support similar schools in improving district policies, decision making, and professional development, as well as provide more insight into inclusive education. Additionally, the study adds important research to the field, helping other educators and policymakers learn more about inclusion and how to make the process more effective.

Ethics and Permissions

Before beginning the study, the researcher obtained permission from the district's superintendent to conduct the interviews. Once permission was granted from the district, the researcher then got permission from IRB.

Each teacher who took part in the study received a consent form online. The form explained what the study was about, that joining was completely their choice, and that their names and answers would be kept confidential. Participants were reminded they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing consequences. To protect their identities, all teachers were referenced using pseudonyms in the study instead of real names or identifying details.

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter described the methodology used for the study in order to learn more about the experiences of general education teachers who worked with students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classrooms. It explained the purpose of the study, research questions, design, participants, setting, and methods used for data collection and analysis.

The chapter also described the procedures the researcher used, such as obtaining permission, asking teachers to take part, conducting the interviews, and using software to identify recurring themes in the responses. It explained how ethical standards were followed and discussed the study's limitations. Overall, this chapter provided a detailed plan for conducting the study. The analysis and findings will be presented in the next chapter

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the challenges K–6 general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. This study focused on teachers' real experiences, their daily struggles, and the ways they work to meet the needs of all students through the use of a qualitative grounded theory design.

Grounded theory, first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), allows themes and ideas to come directly from the data instead of starting with a set theory. This method helped the researcher pay close attention to what teachers said and look for patterns in their answers. Following the process described by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) and Creswell and Creswell (2018)**,** interviews were analyzed step-by-step, first by identifying smaller ideas using open coding, then grouping them into bigger categories, called axial coding. This chapter presents the results of the data analysis. The findings are explained through major themes, supported by direct quotes from participants to show their voices and perspectives clearly.

Sample Characteristics and Description

Eight general education teachers from a small, rural school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania took part in this study. Each participant was currently teaching in an inclusive classroom that included students with disabilities. The group represented a mix of grade levels, years of experience, and classroom settings.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Grade Taught	Gender	Age	Years of Experience	Highest Degree Earned	Number of Students with Disabilities	Classroom Structure
A	2nd	F	34	13	Master's	2	Single homeroom
B	1st	F	45	22	Master's + 60	1	Single homeroom
C	4th	F	46	19	Doctorate	17	Departmentalized across 3 homerooms
D	2nd	F	36	5	Master's	2	Single homeroom
E	1st	F	44	23	2 Masters	2	Single homeroom
F	K	F	47	19	2 Masters	6	Single homeroom
G	5th & 6th	F	46	24	Master's + 60	9	Departmentalized across 3 homerooms
H	6th	M	25	4	Bachelor's	4	Departmentalized across 3 homerooms

All participants taught in grades K-6. Most participants were female, while one was male. Their teaching experience ranged from four years to twenty-four years. Some teachers had previously worked in special education, while others had only taught in general education, but collaborated closely with learning support staff. Participants number of students with disabilities in their classrooms ranged widely from as low as one to as high as seventeen total, however, it is important to note that this number seventeen is among three different classrooms due to departmentalization. In a single homeroom, the highest number of students with disabilities was seven students' total.

The participants taught across all grade levels, from kindergarten through sixth grade, with the exception of third grade. Unfortunately, no third-grade teachers reached out to take part

in this study. Teachers in lower grades focused more on social skills, classroom routines, and building independence, while those in upper elementary grades discussed academic expectations and behavior management. Although their classrooms and experiences were different, every teacher described similar challenges such as not enough time, limited support, and the constant need to adjust instruction to meet all students' needs.

Each participant offered a unique and honest view of inclusion, showing both the difficulties and the rewarding moments that come with supporting students with disabilities in a small, rural district.

Data Collection Procedures

Before collecting any data, approval was received from the university's IRB and the participating school district. Once permission was granted, teachers who met the study's criteria were invited to take part through an email that explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the steps taken to protect their privacy.

Teachers who agreed to participate were given a consent form describing the study, their rights, and how their information would be kept confidential. Interviews were scheduled at times that worked best for each teacher, usually outside of classroom hours. The majority of teachers scheduled their interviews right after or shortly after students left for the day, with the exception of one participant who scheduled their interview during their mid-day planning period.

Each interview was conducted one-on-one with the same list of open-ended questions used with every participant to make sure the conversations were consistent but still flexible enough for teachers to share their personal experiences. The list of interview questions is provided in Appendix D. Interviews were held virtually through Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes each.

With permission, each interview was recorded to make sure every response was captured accurately. During each session, the researcher took field notes to document key observations and contextual details. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim, and the researcher reviewed each recording several times to confirm the accuracy of both the transcripts and notes. Member checking was also used to ensure that participants' responses were represented correctly. All participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts, and no corrections or concerns were reported. All identifying information, such as participant names, school details, and personal references were removed from the transcripts to protect privacy. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, which was used throughout the analysis and reporting of results.

All digital files, including consent forms, recordings, and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected computer. Only the researcher had access to these materials, and all documents will be permanently deleted three years after the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

After all interviews were completed and transcribed, data analysis began. Following the grounded theory process described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the goal was to allow themes and patterns to naturally emerge from what the teachers shared, rather than starting with a set theory.

The researcher used the process outlined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) and Creswell and Creswell (2018) to organize and interpret the data. The analysis included two main stages, which included open coding and axial coding**.**

To help manage the data, the researcher used Excel spreadsheets and MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. Excel spreadsheets were used to manually organize the codes into tables and visually compare patterns across participants. The software was used to store

transcripts, highlight important quotes, and assign codes to specific parts of the text. This made it easier to compare responses across participants and look for common patterns.

During open coding, each transcript was reviewed line by line to identify key ideas, repeated topics, and meaningful statements. Short codes or phrases were created to summarize what the teachers said in their own words.

During axial coding, the open codes were reviewed and grouped into larger categories that showed how ideas connected across interviews. Both Excel and MAXQDA helped organize these categories to reflect the shared challenges, supports, and experiences that teachers described while teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher checked the codes several times to make sure the categories and themes accurately represented what participants said. Notes were taken during each step, and direct quotes from the transcripts were included to support each theme. These steps helped strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study was to explore the challenges faced by K–6 general education teachers when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms within a small, rural school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The goal of this research was to understand teachers' perceptions, experiences, and the supports that influence their ability to effectively include and teach all learners.

Data were analyzed using open and axial coding to identify themes and patterns that represented teachers shared experiences and perspectives. After coding all eight interviews, several key themes began to emerge that reflected how teachers described their preparation, daily responsibilities, and emotional connection to teaching in inclusive settings.

The analysis revealed that general education teachers face a variety of challenges related to inclusion, including limited training, restricted collaboration time, and the constant need to balance diverse student needs within one classroom. Despite these challenges, participants also expressed deep commitment, flexibility, and emotional investment in their students' success.

To address the study's research question and sub-questions, the findings are presented through major themes that reflect both the barriers and supports experienced by teachers in inclusive classrooms. Each theme is described in detail and supported by direct quotes from participants to represent their voices accurately.

The following sections describe these themes as they relate to the research question and two sub-questions.

Primary Research Question:

- What challenges do general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

Sub-questions:

- How do these challenges impact their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively?

- What types of support or resources do general education teachers report needing to better support students with disabilities?

Table 4.2 below identifies the pseudonyms of each participant to reference in vivo responses throughout this chapter. The data are organized by emergent themes that developed through open and axial coding of participant interviews. These themes reflect the shared experiences and perspectives of the eight general education teachers who participated in this

study. Direct quotations are used to illustrate the teachers' authentic voices and to highlight the meaning they attribute to their experiences.

Table 4.2

Participant Pseudonyms

Participant	Pseudonym
Participant A	Ms. Alpha
Participant B	Ms. Bravo
Participant C	Ms. Charlie
Participant D	Ms. Delta
Participant E	Ms. Echo
Participant F	Ms. Foxtrot
Participant G	Ms. Golf
Participant H	Mr. Hotel

Following Table 4.2, the findings are presented by five overarching themes that emerged across the dataset:

1. Insufficient Training and Professional Development

2. Limited Collaboration and Planning Time

    2a. Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers

3. Balancing Diverse Student Needs

4. Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience

    4a. Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice

5. Administrative and Systemic Barriers

    5a. Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy

Each theme is supported by in vivo excerpts and researcher interpretation, connecting the participants lived experiences to the broader research questions guiding this study. A full summary of themes, categories, and supporting in vivo quotes is provided in the Coding Matrix in Appendix E.

The following sections present each theme in detail, beginning with how teachers described their preparation for inclusive teaching. Across participants, many reflected on the professional development and training they have received, and more importantly, what they felt was missing. Their comments revealed that while teachers value inclusion, they often feel unprepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms. This concern forms the basis of theme 1, *Insufficient Training and Professional Development.*

Theme 1: Insufficient Training and Professional Development

Many teachers said they do not get enough training to help students with disabilities. This theme directly relates to research sub-question two, which explored the types of supports teachers find useful or believe are lacking in inclusive settings. Several explained that the professional development (PD) they receive is often too broad and does not match what really happens in their classrooms. They want training that gives real ideas they can use every day.

Ms. Alpha talked a lot about how teacher language can make a big difference for students. She said:

> *I know, I'm like, preaching this responsive-classroom stuff, but I just think that so much of it is the language we use with them. I'm shocked that people do not get the opportunity to learn about their teacher language. Any professional development with teacher language would be huge for paraprofessionals, or teachers, or staff, especially those that*

have disabilities, how to appropriately redirect them without triggering them. All of those

things would make the day easier for the kids and the adults.

Ms. Bravo also felt that better training would help teachers handle classrooms with many

different needs. She said, *"Probably training on how to manage diverse needs, bigger classes*

make it harder to be everywhere, all the time, everything for every kid."

Ms. Charlie shared a different point of view. She explained that she already had training

on differentiated support but did not want to feel like she had to take on a whole new role:

I think that's a tricky one, because I don't want more training. You know, I'm a regular

teacher. I chose to be a regular teacher. I don't support having to feel like I need to also take on

the training of special education support, it is not my area of expertise.

Ms. Delta said she welcomes any learning that helps her understand how to meet her

students' needs. She said, *"I think, honestly, any training to help accommodate students and*

learning how to accommodate students based on whatever disability or learning supports they

need. Any training that will help better support any student in my care, I'd be all for it."

Ms. Echo shared that some PD she attended did not give her strategies that fit her

classroom. She said, *"We have had professional development for that, but I feel like it's so*

specialized, and your needs are usually so individualized that I don't know that I've gained a

bunch of strategies from a professional development."

Ms. Foxtrot explained that responsive-classroom training helped with emotions and

behavior but not always with academics: *"Right now, we're doing a lot of the responsive*

classroom, which I think helps with the behavior and the emotional part. The responsive

classroom I think is helping train some of our teachers."

Ms. Golf said she gets some good ideas from PD, but only parts of it are really helpful: *"The professional development is definitely in place. There are bits and pieces of that that are always very helpful."*

Mr. Hotel also said there has not been much training specifically focused on special education. He explained, *"Nothing comes to mind as in a specific professional development we've had revolving around special education, definitely not recently."* His response showed that, like many of the other teachers, he feels professional development often overlooks the real challenges of inclusion and does not prepare general education teachers with the tools they need to support students with disabilities effectively.

Across all participants, the pattern was clear that teachers want training that is practical and connected to their daily classrooms. They hope for professional development that teaches them how to handle real situations with students who have disabilities instead of broad sessions that do not apply to what they do each day.

Even though many teachers were unhappy with professional development in general, some said that Responsive Classroom was a good and useful training that made their classrooms better. Participants said that the strategies helped them connect better with students, help them control their emotions, and stop behavior problems before they got worse. Teachers liked that this training was based on real classroom interactions and gave them tools they could use right away. Even though it did not always talk about academic differentiation, a lot of participants thought that the focus on social-emotional learning and teacher language made a big difference in their classrooms.

Although teachers wanted more relevant training, they also recognized that stronger teamwork and shared planning time could help bridge many of those gaps. This led to the next theme of *Limited Collaboration and Planning Time.*

Theme 2: Limited Collaboration and Planning Time

This theme aligns with research sub-question two, as teachers described supports and systemic structures, such as collaboration and shared planning, that most influence their ability to include students with disabilities effectively. While teachers consistently expressed frustration about the lack of collaboration, all eight teachers talked about how there is not enough time to plan and work with special education staff. Most said they have a short co-planning period once during a six-day cycle. They try their best to use that time well, but many said it is not enough to meet the needs of their students. Teachers also explained that schedules often make it hard to find shared time with the special education teacher or paraprofessionals, even though collaboration helps lessons run smoother.

Ms. Alpha explained, *"We meet with the learning support teacher once every six-day cycle."* She added that having more frequent collaboration would help make lessons more consistent for students.

Ms. Bravo shared a similar experience, saying, *"I change my schedule around so I can do those things when I have the extra support in the classroom."* Her comment showed that teachers often rearrange their own plans just to find short windows for collaboration.

Ms. Charlie described how her team only started co-planning recently: *"We just started co-planning once a cycle for 20–30 minutes. If we actually co-taught, that would be great, but we don't truly do it."* She said most of the planning still happens alone because of limited time and a lack of shared schedules.

Ms. Delta also explained that collaboration is scheduled but brief: *"We do co-planning once a six-day cycle."*

Ms. Echo said she can easily reach the learning support teacher because of her small school, but it still does not happen as often as she would like: *"We co-plan every six days for about 20 minutes. So we kind of just chat."*

Ms. Foxtrot was thankful that this year her kindergarten team has built-in collaboration time: *"Having common planning time with the learning support teacher this year was huge. I'm hoping to get some extra practice for some of those low kids."*

Ms. Golf described how the lack of co-planning time affects her upper-elementary classes: *"I don't have any co-planning or common time, so I make all the adaptations and modifications on my own."* She also shared that her district's special education teachers are often pulled to cover other duties, leaving even less time to collaborate: *"Learning support teachers are constantly pulled to cover meeting for other teachers, to be day-to-day substitutes, to cover extra duties when needed."* She even mentioned how one learning support teacher was able to follow her schedule very little this year, stating *"of the 46 days that we've been in school, she has been able to follow her schedule and duties as assigned 14 of the 46 days."*

Mr. Hotel also discussed the limited opportunities for collaboration and shared planning. He said, *"We get a co-planning period once every six-day cycle. It's better than not having it at all."* While he appreciated having any scheduled time to meet, he explained that inconsistency and unpredictable schedules make it difficult to plan effectively. *"My co-teacher doesn't know what she's going to be doing on a day-to-day, and I don't learn what she's doing until she knows,"* he said. His comments reflected the same frustration expressed by others that

collaboration is valued but often disrupted by scheduling conflicts and competing responsibilities.

Across all participants, teachers agreed that collaboration helps inclusion work better, but they lack the consistent time to make it happen. Many plan lessons alone, meet briefly during short cycles, or catch the special education teacher in the hallway to share updates. The pattern showed that even when collaboration exists, it is often limited, rushed, or inconsistent, making it harder for teachers to meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms.

Even with limited time, participants emphasized that positive working relationships were essential for making inclusion successful, forming the basis of subtheme 2a, *Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers.*

Subtheme 2a: Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers

This subtheme further deepens research sub-question two, highlighting how strong interpersonal collaboration acts as an informal support system for inclusion. While teachers consistently expressed frustration about the lack of collaboration time, they all spoke positively about the special education teachers they work with. Participants described these colleagues as supportive, dependable, and deeply committed to helping students succeed. Even though formal co-planning time was limited, teachers emphasized that trust and teamwork made a significant difference in their classrooms. The relationships they built with their learning support teachers often compensated for the lack of structured collaboration and contributed to a more positive inclusion experience.

Ms. Alpha said, *"My co-teacher doesn't need to be told what to do; she just jumps in. It helps me save relationships with kids."* She explained that this kind of trust and shared understanding made daily instruction smoother and more effective.

Ms. Bravo said, *"I change my schedule around so I can do things when I have extra support in the classroom."* She shared that having help, even for short periods, allows her to give students more focused attention.

Ms. Charlie spoke highly of the learning support teachers in her school, noting that they work hard to support students despite limited time and staff. She said, *"I feel like that our few staff members that we have try the hardest."* Her comment reflected a deep appreciation for the effort and dedication of the special education team, showing that strong relationships and shared commitment between general and special education teachers make inclusion more effective.

Ms. Delta said she appreciates how approachable her learning support teacher is and that they *"do a lot of team things to support each other."*

Ms. Echo added, *"I see her every day, so I can usually just catch her if I need to."* Her comment showed how approachable her learning support teacher is and how she makes herself available whenever necessary.

Ms. Foxtrot shared that built-in collaboration this year has been a highlight: *"Having common planning time with the learning support teacher this year was huge. I'm hoping to get some extra practice for some of those low kids."*

Ms. Golf praised her special education colleagues for their dedication despite being overextended:

I know that if I went to any of my learning support teachers and said to them, I have this situation, I'm not sure how to handle it, or I have this material coming up, and I'm not sure what the best way is, they would make time to work with me and figure out and give ideas on what I should do. And that's just because they're excellent people, and they go above and beyond. It's

not a schedule requirement for them, but I know that they are available if I make time to talk to them.

Mr. Hotel also praised his co-teacher, saying, *"When my co-teacher is actually co-teaching with me, that's a great support, when she's not in the classroom, it's pretty much zero."* His comment showed appreciation for her effort and reflected the value of strong working relationships despite limited time together. He explained that her absence is usually because she is covering classes or being pulled for other duties, highlighting how staffing demands often interrupt otherwise strong partnerships.

Across participants, teachers described their special education partners as key to making inclusion work. These relationships were built on shared goals, mutual respect, and ongoing communication. The teachers' comments showed that even without formal systems in place, strong interpersonal relationships and professional collaboration helped bridge many of the gaps created by limited planning time.

Although these supportive relationships strengthened inclusion efforts, teachers explained that collaboration alone could not address the wide range of academic and behavioral needs in their classrooms. This challenge introduced the next theme, *Balancing Diverse Student Needs.*

Theme 3: Balancing Diverse Student Needs

This theme aligns with research sub-question one, showing how the daily challenges of meeting diverse academic and behavioral needs impacts teachers' ability to implement inclusive practices effectively. All eight teachers described how teaching students with a wide range of abilities, behaviors, and learning needs is one of the hardest parts of inclusion. They explained that every day is different, and they must constantly adjust lessons, expectations, and classroom management to make sure all students can learn. Teachers said it can be difficult to meet

academic goals while also helping students who need extra support, especially when they do not have enough help in the classroom.

Ms. Alpha talked about how much time she spends trying to meet everyone's needs, saying, *"I probably spend too much time differentiating."* She also shared that she carefully plans her classroom setups and routines so students can be successful: *"I put a ton of time into planning the social-emotional piece, who could they sit next to, what modeling should we do."*

Ms. Bravo described how strategies that work one day may not work the next: *"What works one day doesn't necessarily work the next. You have to constantly find new tricks."* She said she tries to find ways to teach the same material to all students but must change how she presents it to help everyone stay engaged.

Ms. Charlie explained that she teaches many students who need different levels of help and that it is not always possible to finish lessons as planned: *"I cannot teach full lessons. I have to have a bucket-list approach."* She said she often focuses on the most important parts of the lesson and adjusts the rest depending on how students are doing that day.

Ms. Delta said that meeting all students' needs takes creativity and patience: *"You might have to teach 18 different ways for 18 different kids."* She added that flexibility is key because students all learn differently.

Ms. Echo described how challenging it can be to keep the class on track while helping students with more significant needs: *"It's hard to keep the other 15 kids focused."* She shared examples of having students with sensory needs and nonverbal communication and said that even with support, balancing everyone's needs can be stressful.

Ms. Foxtrot described how she has to make special setups and behavior plans for individual students: *"I have one student I have to have a completely different setup for to avoid*

trashing the room." She said some students need specific reinforcement systems and routines, while others work independently.

Ms. Golf shared that she teaches students at very different reading levels and must adapt lessons for them: *"They do what everyone else is doing, but I adapt assessments or pull small groups."* She also said that while she tries to make lessons fair for everyone, time makes it difficult to find materials that meet each student's level.

Mr. Hotel also described the difficulty of meeting a wide range of needs while keeping lessons on pace. He said, *"I can only differentiate so much, I don't want it to be slowing down the rest of the students."* Showing how constant adjustments can make it hard to balance fairness and progress for all learners.

Together, these teachers described the daily challenge of trying to balance academic instruction, behavior management, and emotional support. They want to meet the needs of every student but often feel stretched thin. Most said that without extra hands or flexible schedules, they have to make quick choices about which needs to be prioritized. Even so, their comments showed deep care for their students and a strong desire to help each one succeed, even when it feels overwhelming.

Balancing these varied needs left many teachers feeling emotionally stretched. Their reflections revealed both the strain and the resilience that define daily life in inclusive classrooms, which is captured in theme 4, *Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience.*

Theme 4: Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience

This theme supports the primary research question, demonstrating the emotional challenges teachers face when working with students with disabilities and how those experiences shape their inclusive teaching. All eight teachers described how teaching in inclusive classrooms

affects them emotionally. They said the work can be stressful, tiring, and sometimes discouraging, but they also talked about how they keep going because they care about their students. Many shared that they have learned to be flexible, patient, and reflective over time. The emotional impact of inclusion showed both strain and strength. Teachers often feel drained but remain committed to doing what is best for their students.

Ms. Alpha explained how she has grown through experience and reflection. She said, *"It took me a long time to get to that point where I'm not just reacting, but digging deeper."* She described learning to look for the reason behind students' behavior instead of responding out of frustration.

Ms. Bravo spoke about how hard it can be to ask for help or admit when things are difficult. She said, *"Not having to feel less than because we need support."* Her comment showed how some teachers feel guilty or embarrassed about needing extra assistance, even though they know it would help their students.

Ms. Charlie shared that inclusion work often leaves her feeling like she is doing two jobs at once. She said, *"It's exhausting and constant becoming a special education teacher on top of being a regular ed teacher."* She added that trying to keep up with IEP goals and general curriculum expectations sometimes feels impossible, especially without consistent support.

Ms. Delta said she has learned to accept that not everything goes as planned. *"Being flexible is the biggest thing. It's okay to take detours to make things work."* She said that teaching students with different needs has taught her patience and the importance of adjusting her expectations.

Ms. Echo described how managing the needs of all students can be emotionally draining, especially when students with significant needs require constant attention. She explained, *"I*

have one student right now who is nonverbal. She just kind of runs around the classroom because she's unable to sit in a desk for very long. It's hard then to keep the other fifteen kids focused." She said this makes classroom management challenging and sometimes overwhelming, but she continues to adjust routines and collaborate with her learning support teacher to make it work. Her comments reflected both the stress and the persistence teachers show in maintaining a positive classroom despite daily difficulties.

Ms. Foxtrot shared that some days are very difficult, especially when students have behavioral outbursts. She said, *"It's just crazy right now, because I have one that is a huge behavior. Everything's a little bit different with the way that I'm doing things this year."* Her honesty showed the emotional toll of working in an unpredictable classroom, but also her determination to keep trying new approaches.

Ms. Golf expressed sadness and frustration about not being able to give her students everything they need. She said, *"It's sad and frustrating when you want to do your best but can't."* She also said she continues to advocate for her students and coworkers because she believes in what inclusion can be when done right.

Mr. Hotel shared that the added responsibilities of inclusion can be overwhelming at times. He said, *"It really feels like a lot of the general education teachers are taking the reins on special education teacher duties, it adds to our plate."* His comment reflected the frustration of balancing multiple roles but also the persistence to continue supporting students despite those challenges.

Across all participants, teachers showed strong emotional awareness and resilience. They spoke honestly about exhaustion and frustration but also described the pride they feel when their students make progress. Many teachers said that even when support is lacking, their motivation

comes from seeing small successes and building relationships with their students. This mix of challenge and commitment showed how teachers balance their emotional well-being with their dedication to inclusion.

Beyond coping with emotional stress, several teachers described channeling their frustration into purposeful action by advocating for students and speaking up about needed changes. This perspective helped shape Subtheme 4a, *Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice.*

Subtheme 4a: Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice

This subtheme also connects to the primary research question, highlighting how teachers channel the emotional strain of inclusion into advocacy, reflection, and professional growth. Along with describing the emotional challenges of inclusion, participants also demonstrated a strong sense of advocacy and professional voice. Their commitment to students often led them to speak up, problem-solve, and take initiative when systems or policies fell short. Rather than waiting for direction, teachers found their own ways to support students and improve inclusion.

Ms. Alpha said, *"My co-teacher doesn't need to be told what to do; she just jumps in. It helps me save relationships with kids."* Her comment showed how collaboration and initiative helped her maintain positive connections with students.

Ms. Charlie explained that even without specialized training, she still finds ways to meet students' needs: *"I appreciate time and collaboration and working with and how to plan and work with co-teachers."*

Ms. Golf described going beyond her classroom to raise concerns with leadership: *"I wrote a proposal and talked with administrators. People need to know full inclusion isn't working for everyone."*

Mr. Hotel also showed a strong sense of advocacy. He said, *"I have high expectations for everybody, whether you have an IEP or not. I don't think our special needs students are being pushed enough, but in general I don't think the school does."* His comment reflected his belief in holding students to high standards and speaking up when he feels expectations fall short.

These examples highlight how teachers turn frustration into action. Their advocacy reflects both their emotional investment and their professional responsibility. Even when facing systemic barriers, participants described finding ways to make inclusion better, through communication, creativity, and a willingness to speak up for students who might otherwise be overlooked. This sense of purpose deepened their resilience and showed that teachers see themselves not just as implementers of policy but as active voices for change within their schools.

While teachers worked tirelessly to advocate within their classrooms, they also identified larger systemic factors that limited their efforts. These barriers are explored in theme 5, *Administrative and Systemic Barriers.*

Theme 5: Administrative and Systemic Barriers

This theme addresses the primary research question, revealing systemic challenges such as limited staffing and inconsistent administrative support, which hinders teachers' ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Every teacher shared stories about system-level problems that make inclusion harder. They talked about limited staff, scheduling issues, and district decisions that take support away from students who need it. Many said their schools have moved to full inclusion without enough teachers, paraprofessionals, or time. These issues left them feeling that inclusion often depends on their own effort rather than a strong system of support.

Ms. Alpha explained that even when she wants to follow every IEP, the lack of help makes it nearly impossible. She said, *"The biggest challenge in implementing IEPs is support in the classroom, sometimes impossible."* She also shared that she spends hours after school working on accommodations that she cannot finish during the day.

Ms. Bravo said her rural school does not have enough programs to meet all student needs. *"It's hard being in a small rural school. We send kids out because we don't have the programs to meet their needs,"* she said. She explained that while her district tries to support inclusion, distance and small size make it difficult to provide the same services larger schools can.

Ms. Charlie talked about how special education staff are pulled to fill other roles, leaving students without the help they are supposed to receive. *"Special-ed staff being pulled as subs is a huge disservice,"* she said. She described how losing this support makes it almost impossible to plan and teach effectively.

Ms. Delta also wished for more staff support, saying, *"Having a paraprofessional or another body in the classroom would be the best thing."* She said that even a little extra help each day could make a big difference for students with higher needs.

Ms. Echo said her district's policy to end pull-out instruction created more problems. *"We don't do pull-out programs anymore. Instruction needs to be provided in our classroom."* She said this "all push-in" approach sounds good in theory, but it does not work well when there aren't enough adults to support it.

Some participants also noted an unintended consequence of current inclusion and funding policies. They explained that when students qualify for special education services, they often lose access to Title I support. This shift results in less overall intervention time rather than more because students are no longer eligible for pull-out sessions provided under Title I. Teachers

expressed concern that these students, who often need the most support, end up receiving fewer targeted interventions due to overlapping program restrictions and scheduling limitations. A few teachers admitted that this situation sometimes makes them hesitant to refer students for special education evaluation because students may actually lose support once identified. This unintended outcome highlights a gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, where well-meaning systems sometimes work against one another rather than complementing each other.

Ms. Foxtrot said kindergarten teachers often get overlooked. *"Kindergarten sometimes gets forgotten. We have needs here too,"* she said. She explained that many of her students have speech, behavior, or learning concerns but are not yet identified for services, and she often manages those needs alone.

Ms. Golf shared several examples of how district-level decisions and priorities affect classrooms. She said, *"of the 46 days that we've been in school, she has been able to follow her schedule and duties as assigned 14 of the 46 days."* She also shared her frustration with funding choices, saying, *"Full inclusion was implemented to save money, but the district can afford a new weight room but not learning support teachers."* Her comments showed how budget and staffing decisions often put financial concerns ahead of student needs.

Mr. Hotel also described how staffing shortages and scheduling demands affect inclusion. He said, *"Access can be limited even with the co-teacher in the classroom. She's used in other areas and called to do other things."* He added, *"I think this district would benefit from hiring more people, just getting a couple more people on the special ed staff."* His comments showed how frequent reassignments and limited personnel reduce the support available to students and add to teachers' workload.

Across participants, teachers said that these administrative and systemic barriers make inclusion harder to carry out with quality. They described a mismatch between district goals and classroom realities. Many said they believe in inclusion but feel that their schools have not provided enough staffing, training, or flexibility to make it successful. The data showed that teachers are committed to helping all students but feel limited by systems that expect them to do more with less.

In addition to staffing and resource issues, teachers pointed to confusion surrounding how inclusion policies are interpreted and enforced across schools, leading to subtheme 5a, *Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy.*

Subtheme 5a: Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy

This subtheme expands on the primary research question, emphasizing how inconsistent or unclear inclusion policies create confusion and additional challenges for teachers in inclusive classrooms. In addition to describing staffing and resource shortages, teachers also expressed frustration with how inclusion policies are interpreted and applied differently across schools and districts. Several participants felt that decisions about inclusion were driven more by budget or administrative convenience than by student needs. These inconsistencies led teachers to question whether inclusion was always being implemented in ways that truly supported all learners.

Ms. Echo explained that even within her own district, expectations for inclusion vary: *"Different administrations interpret inclusion differently."* She said that leadership changes often bring new ideas or requirements, leaving teachers uncertain about what inclusion is supposed to look like from year to year.

Ms. Golf shared similar concerns, saying, *"I almost feel like they've doubled down on this. My district is not poor. We could afford more learning support teachers. I don't understand*

why that's not a priority." She described how staffing and scheduling decisions sometimes appear financially motivated rather than student-focused, creating frustration among teachers who want to provide appropriate support.

Mr. Hotel's experiences also reflected how inconsistent staffing and support can undermine inclusion. He explained that his co-teacher is often pulled to cover other classes or duties, which limits the intended benefits of having a co-teaching model. His perspective showed how systemic gaps, rather than teacher attitudes, often make inclusion difficult to carry out effectively.

Participants emphasized that the concept of inclusion is widely supported in theory but uneven in practice. They said that inconsistent policies, shifting administrative expectations, and lack of communication make it difficult to provide the level of individualized instruction students need. The comments in this subtheme reflected teachers' belief that true inclusion requires shared understanding, clear guidance, and adequate resources, not just policy mandates.

Despite these differing interpretations and system-level challenges, participants remained dedicated to supporting all students. The themes collectively illustrate both the promise and complexity of inclusion and are summarized below.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study showed that K–6 general education teachers in one small, rural school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania who teach in inclusive classrooms face ongoing challenges with training, teamwork, and support from their schools. Five main themes came out of the interviews: *Insufficient Training and Professional Development, Limited Collaboration and Planning Time, Balancing Diverse Student Needs, Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience,* and *Administrative and Systemic Barriers.*

Three related subthemes also appeared across the teachers' stories: *Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers, Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice,* and *Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy.*

Teachers often said they do not get enough useful training for working with students with disabilities. The professional development they receive is usually too general and does not fit their daily classroom needs. However, several teachers identified Responsive Classroom as one of the few professional development programs that made a meaningful impact, helping them improve classroom relationships, emotional regulation, and student behavior.

They also said they do not have enough time to plan lessons with special education staff. Even so, they spoke very positively about their learning support teachers, describing them as helpful, dependable, and great partners.

One of the hardest parts of inclusion, teachers said, is balancing many different student needs in one classroom. They described constantly changing lessons and routines to make sure all students can learn.

Teachers also shared how this work affects them emotionally. Many said it can be exhausting and stressful, but their love for their students keeps them going. The subtheme *Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice* showed how teachers use their voices and professional judgment to speak up for students and make positive changes in their schools.

Finally, teachers pointed out that many of their struggles come from system-level issues, like not enough staff, confusing policies, or unclear expectations about inclusion. Some also explained that when students qualify for special education, they lose Title I support, sometimes ending up with less help overall. This unintended outcome made a few teachers hesitant to refer students for special education, since it could actually reduce the support, those students receive.

Others said that different school leaders interpret inclusion in different ways, which makes things even more confusing. Still, every teacher expressed strong dedication to their students and a deep belief in the value of inclusive education.

Chapter Four Summary

This chapter presented the results of what eight K–6 teachers said about teaching students with disabilities in their classrooms. After analyzing the interviews, five main themes and three subthemes were found. The five main themes included: Insufficient Training and Professional Development, Limited Collaboration and Planning Time, Balancing Diverse Student Needs, Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience, and Administrative and Systemic Barriers.

The teachers also said their jobs were stressful because of limited resources and unclear school policies. Even with those problems, they still cared a lot about their students and tried their best every day. The subthemes, including Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers, Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice, and Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy, helped explain how they handled challenges.

Overall, the teachers showed that inclusion worked mostly because they were dedicated, creative, and cared about their students. Chapter Five explains how these results connect to other research and how schools can do a better job supporting inclusion.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Chapter Five explains what the results of this study mean and why they are important. The goal of this study was to learn about the challenges that K–6 general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in their classrooms. The study took place in one small, rural school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania and looked at what teachers experience each day as they try to help all students learn. The study used a grounded theory design, which means the information came from what the teachers said during their interviews. This allowed them to share their thoughts, struggles, and successes in their own words, to get an accurate picture of their experiences.

This chapter connects the results from Chapter Four to the research and literature reviewed in Chapter Two. It discusses how the findings help explain the real challenges of inclusion and what they mean for teachers, schools, and future research.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

Primary Research Question:

- What challenges do general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

Sub-questions:

- How do these challenges impact their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively?

- What types of support or resources do general education teachers report needing to better support students with disabilities?

Through data analysis, five main themes and three subthemes were found:

1. Insufficient Training and Professional Development

2. Limited Collaboration and Planning Time

   2a: Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers

3. Balancing Diverse Student Needs

4. Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience

   4a: Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice

5. Administrative and Systemic Barriers

   5a: Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy

These themes showed that teachers want to do what is best for all students and believe in inclusion, but they often feel unprepared and overwhelmed. The results also showed how much teachers care about their students and how hard they work to make inclusion work, even when it is hard.

In Chapter Four, the teachers shared their experiences and ideas from the interviews. Chapter Five builds on those findings by connecting them to the research discussed in Chapter Two. It explains what the results mean for teachers and schools and offers suggestions for how schools can better support inclusive education in the future.

Discussion of Findings and Implications

The teachers in this study described both challenges and successes when teaching students with disabilities. They spoke honestly about what makes inclusion difficult but also showed how much they care about helping all students learn. Their voices add to what other researchers have said about inclusion and highlight the ongoing need for better training, teamwork, and support for teachers in general education settings.

Overall, the findings from this study agree with much of the past research about inclusion. Studies such as those by DeSutter and LeMire (2016), Lindacher (2020), and Apitz et al. (2017) have shown that teachers often feel unprepared to teach students with disabilities and want more practical training. The teachers in this study said the same thing, showing that this concern continues to be a problem. Other researchers, like Goldstein et al. (2013) and Tiwari (2024), found that teachers need more collaboration time and stronger administrative support to make inclusion work well. Those same issues appeared in this study too, especially in a small rural setting where staff and resources are limited.

The findings also showed the emotional side of inclusion. Many teachers talked about feeling tired, stressed, or frustrated, but they also shared how rewarding it is when students succeed. This shows the mix of challenges and dedication that teachers experience every day. The results help explain why teacher well-being and resilience are so important in making inclusive classrooms successful.

Theme 1: Insufficient Training and Professional Development

Most of the teachers in this study said they do not get enough training to help students with disabilities in their classrooms. This theme relates to previous studies indicating that educators frequently perceive themselves as inadequately prepared to instruct in inclusive environments. Research conducted by DeSutter and LeMire (2016) and Lindacher (2020) indicates that numerous general education teachers perceive an obligation to address a diverse array of student needs, yet lack the required training to do so proficiently. Apitz et al. (2017) found that many teachers struggle with inclusion because they do not receive enough specific training or support to address students' diverse learning needs.

The teachers in this study said the same thing. They wanted training that would teach them useful skills they could use every day, like how to deal with behavior problems, change lessons, and help students with different needs. Some teachers said that the professional development they get does not connect to their daily work, while others said they have not had much or any training that focuses on students with disabilities.

This lack of preparation can make it harder to include everyone. It can be stressful and frustrating for teachers when they do not know how to plan, adapt lessons or deal with different learning needs. Goldstein et al. (2013) also said that teachers need to keep learning about new ways and tools for inclusive education. The results of this study corroborate that notion.

In general, both the teachers in this study and those in earlier studies agreed that they need better and more specific training. Teachers want professional development that helps them deal with real problems, not just general information. Teachers could feel more ready and make classrooms more welcoming for all students if they received regular, hands-on training on how to include everyone.

Theme 2: Limited Collaboration and Planning Time

Another major challenge teachers talked about was not having enough time to plan or work with special education staff. This connects to what other studies have found about how teamwork and time affect inclusion. Lindacher (2020) found that when teachers do not have enough shared planning time, it becomes harder to meet students' needs. Goldstein et al. (2013) also explained that inclusion works best when teachers can plan together and share ideas, but that cannot happen when schedules are too full.

The majority of teachers in this study said they usually meet with the learning support teacher only once during a six-day cycle for about 20 minutes. They agreed that these short

meetings help, but the time is not enough to plan lessons, share strategies, or talk through how to support students who need extra help. Many said they would like more consistent and longer collaboration so lessons could better match what students need.

The results also line up with research showing that time limits and heavy workloads make collaboration harder. Smith et al. (2015) found that individualized lesson planning, attending IEP meetings, and completing special education paperwork often add to teachers' stress and take up time they could use for planning. Goldstein et al. (2013) explained that many general education teachers feel they do not have the time or training to handle both their classroom duties and the extra responsibilities that come with inclusion. Tiwari (2024) added that inclusion works best when schools give teachers ongoing time and support to work together, which many small, rural districts struggle to provide.

The problem goes beyond scheduling; it also connects to resources and support. Studies by Al Jaffal (2022), Bahr et al. (2024), and Turnbull et al. (2019) show that when schools lack professional support and materials, teachers' workloads become heavier and their effectiveness can suffer. These same challenges were seen in this study. The teachers often said they plan alone, make modifications by themselves, and try to keep up with their planning during after school hours.

When teachers do not have enough time or support, they often feel overwhelmed. Without steady communication between general and special education teachers, inclusion becomes more stressful and less effective. These results reinforce what earlier studies found, that regular collaboration time and manageable workloads are not just helpful, but necessary for inclusion to truly work.

Subtheme 2a: Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers

Even though teachers said they did not have enough time to plan with special education staff, they spoke very highly of them. Many described their learning support teachers as dependable, flexible, and willing to help whenever needed. They said these positive relationships often made up for the lack of scheduled collaboration time. Teachers shared that trust and communication with their special education partners made daily instruction smoother and more effective, even when they had limited time to meet.

This finding connects to earlier research showing that strong professional relationships help make inclusion more successful. Goldstein et al. (2013) and Smith et al. (2015) noted that collaboration is one of the most important parts of effective inclusion, especially when teachers face time or workload challenges. The teachers in this study echoed that, saying they rely on one another for problem-solving, emotional support, and sharing ideas. Even quick hallway conversations or short planning sessions helped them stay on the same page about student goals and behaviors.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) encourages collaboration between teachers to make sure students with disabilities learn in the least restrictive environment. The participants in this study showed that even when resources are limited, strong working relationships can make a big difference. Tiwari (2024) also explained that teamwork is a key part of teacher resilience, and when teachers feel supported by their coworkers, they are more likely to stay positive and committed to inclusion.

These positive relationships show that inclusion depends on more than just having time, as it also depends on teamwork, trust, and mutual respect. When teachers feel supported by one another, they can create a stronger and more inclusive classroom environment. However, without regular planning time and administrative support, even the best relationships can only go so far.

Theme 3: Balancing Diverse Student Needs

Teachers in this study said one of the hardest parts of inclusion is trying to meet the many different needs in their classrooms. Every student learns in their own way, and it can be hard to make sure everyone understands the material. Teachers said they often have to change lessons, try new ideas, and give extra help to some students while keeping the rest of the class focused.

Other studies have found the same thing. Bateman and Cline (2016) and Goldstein et al. (2013) said teachers have to manage both learning and behavior, but they do not always get the training or help they need. Brownell et al. (2010) also found that when schools do not have enough aides or support staff, it makes classroom management much harder. Many of the teachers in this study said they wanted more help with behavior because it often takes away from teaching time.

Teachers shared that they try to stay patient and flexible when behavior problems happen. Sometimes lessons stop because a student gets upset, distracted, or is disruptive to the rest of the class. Smith et al. (2015) and Turnbull et al. (2019) said that dealing with these issues every day can make teachers feel tired and stressed. Even with those challenges, teachers in this study said they try their best to stay positive and use clear routines, rewards, and kindness to help students do their best.

Trying to balance all of these needs means teachers have to make hard choices about what to focus on each day. They want students to meet grade-level goals, but they also want students with disabilities to feel supported and part of the class. Hehir et al. (2016) said that true inclusion means more than just sitting in the same classroom, moreover, it means having the support, materials, and chances to take part in learning. The teachers in this study agreed, but said it is difficult to do without more time and help.

Tiwari (2024) and Turnbull et al. (2019) also said that trying to manage all these responsibilities can be stressful for teachers. The teachers in this study said they care deeply about their students and want to help them, but some days it feels like too much without the appropriate support.

Overall, this theme shows that inclusion takes a lot of patience and hard work. Teachers are trying to balance learning, behavior, and emotions all at once. They stay dedicated to their students, but they need more time, staff, and support to make inclusion work better for everyone.

Theme 4: Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience

Teachers in this study said that it can be both rewarding and tiring to teach in an inclusive classroom. They said they care a lot about their students and want them to do well, but the job can also be too much for them. Most participants voiced how difficult it is to meet so many different needs at once, especially when there is not enough time or help. They still work hard, though, because seeing their students grow makes it all worth it.

Other studies came to the same conclusions. Goldstein et al. (2013) and Turnbull et al. (2019) explained that educators in inclusive classrooms frequently encounter elevated stress levels and a heightened risk of burnout in the absence of adequate planning time or support from colleagues. Tiwari (2024) also discovered that educators occasionally perceive they must manage all responsibilities by themselves. The teachers in this study had similar experiences, but they also said that helping students make progress keeps them going.

Teachers talked about how inclusion affects their feelings. Some participants expressed feelings of pride when their students reach their goals or make small progress. Others stated it is hard not to feel down when lessons do not go as planned or when students have trouble staying

on track. Smith et al. (2015) emphasized how teachers often have these ups and downs, which can change how they feel about their jobs.

Despite these difficulties, the teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience. They said they try to stay positive, remember what the person of their jobs are, and focus on the little things that go well. Tiwari (2024) found that teachers are more likely to be resilient if they have a sense of purpose, support from others, and the belief that every student can learn. The teachers in this study demonstrated the same level of strength and commitment daily.

This theme is also related to how teachers feel and think about inclusion. Research conducted by Al Jaffal (2022) and Greenidge (2019) indicates that educators with favorable attitudes towards inclusion are more inclined to modify their instructional approaches and explore innovative methods to engage all students. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) found that educators who perceive student differences as opportunities, rather than challenges, are generally more confident and receptive to inclusive teaching methodologies. Most of the teachers in this study had those same traits, as they believed in their students' potential and worked hard to help them do well.

Teachers' confidence can also be impacted by emotional stress and not having enough support. Knouse (2018) and Lindacher (2020) found that teachers who feel alone or overworked sometimes wonder if inclusion is a good idea. Some participants in this study felt the same way, but they said that working together, getting support, and having small wins helped them keep going.

In general, this theme shows that how teachers feel and what they think about inclusion has a big impact on how effective it is. Teachers are more likely to stay strong, hopeful, and

committed to helping every student learn when they feel supported and believe in what they are doing.

Subtheme 4a: Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice

Many teachers in this study said they speak up for their students because they believe inclusion is important, even though teaching in an inclusive classroom can be hard. They expressed how all students deserve to learn and feel part of the class. Some teachers said they share ideas with administration or other teachers to help students with disabilities get more support. Others said they speak up when something is not working so that things can improve.

This connects to other research that shows teachers' attitudes and beliefs play a big role in how they teach. Al Jaffal (2022), Greenidge (2019), and Tiwari (2024) said that teachers who have a positive attitude about inclusion are more likely to try new strategies and stand up for their students. The teachers in this study showed that same belief. They said that even when it is challenging, they keep speaking up because they know inclusion helps students learn and grow.

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) also said that teachers who see differences as opportunities are more confident and willing to lead change. The teachers in this study did just that, by using their voices to share ideas, help others, and make inclusion better for everyone.

This subtheme shows that teachers are stronger advocates for their students when they believe in inclusion and feel supported.

Theme 5: Administrative and Systemic Barriers

Teachers in this study expressed that one of the hardest things about inclusion is the policies that school leaders have in place. Because this district practices full inclusion, students with disabilities spend the entire school day in general education classrooms. While teachers support the idea of inclusion, they said it can be very difficult to meet every student's needs

without enough time, staff, or flexibility. Mostly all teachers said the scheduling conflicts and the misuse of special education teachers makes it harder to implement inclusion.

Other studies have found similar issues. Al Jaffal (2022), Greenidge (2019), and Lindacher (2020) elucidated that when school administrators fail to articulate inclusion policies or their implementation, educators are left feeling defeated. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) and Knouse (2018) also found that students with disabilities can have unfair experiences in different classrooms when inclusion practices are not clear or consistent.

Some of the teachers in this study said that administrators do not always know enough about inclusive education. Greenidge (2019) and Tiwari (2024) discovered that numerous administrators desire to assist yet lack the requisite knowledge or resources. Because of this, teachers often have to work extra hard to solve problems on their own, which makes their jobs even harder.

Inconsistency was another problem that teachers brought up. Some schools have policies that promote inclusion, but they do not give teachers the training or tools they need to make them work. Al Jaffal (2022) and Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) said that teachers get frustrated and overwhelmed when schools do not follow through on their inclusion policies with real support. The teachers in this study explained how they did not have sufficient or specific training on teaching students with disabilities. They also expressed the issue of special educators being pulled to cover other duties, which significantly impacts general educators' mission of carrying out inclusion successfully in their classrooms.

Good leadership can make a big difference. Studies show that teachers feel more confident and supported when administrators make their expectations clear, give them training, and encourage them to work together (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Greenidge, 2019). The teachers

in this study agreed that when principals listen to their concerns and make inclusion a shared

goal, it helps make the school a better place to be.

This theme shows that inclusion is not solely in the hands of teachers, however, it starts

with the systems and leaders who guide them. In a district with full inclusion, clear

communication, consistent policies, and ongoing administrative support are even more

important. Inclusion is more likely to work when administrators make clear rules, keep everyone

informed, and give strong support. But when those things are not there, teachers feel unprepared,

stressed, and unsure of how to make inclusion work well.

Subtheme 5a: Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy

Teachers in this study explained that one of the most frustrating things about inclusion for

teachers was when school rules and policies were not clear. They said that different

administrators or grade levels sometimes have different ideas about what inclusion means. This

means that teachers do not always know what they need to do or how much help students with

disabilities should get in the regular classroom. In a district that practices full inclusion, where all

students with disabilities spend their whole day in the general education setting, this confusion is

even worse. Teachers said that they support inclusion, but they are stressed and unsure because

there is not clear guidance on how to make it work.

This finding connects to what other studies have shown. Al Jaffal (2022) and Greenidge

(2019) found that unclear policies can make teachers feel uncertain about how to apply inclusion

in their classrooms. Lindacher (2020) also said that when policies are interpreted differently by

school leaders, teachers receive mixed messages, which leads to confusion and inconsistency.

Teachers in this study said that inclusion practices often depend on who is in charge.

Because this district follows a full inclusion model, teachers said they often feel pressure to meet

all student needs inside the classroom, even when additional support might be needed

elsewhere. This inconsistency can cause problems for both teachers and students. Knouse (2018)

and Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) also found that these mixed approaches make it harder to

create equal learning experiences across classrooms.

Teachers said they want clear communication about what inclusion should look like and

how to make it work. They said policies should be backed up with real support, like training,

planning time, and consistent schedules for special education teachers. When expectations are

clear and everyone follows the same plan, teachers feel more confident and students benefit

more.

Overall, this subtheme shows that when inclusion policies are unclear or applied

differently, it creates stress and confusion for teachers. In a district that uses full inclusion,

consistent communication and administrative guidance are essential to help teachers feel

prepared and supported in meeting every student's needs.

The five main ideas and three sub-ideas in this study show that inclusion can be both

good and bad for general education teachers. Teachers said they really want to help all of their

students learn, but they have trouble doing so because they don't have enough training, planning

time, or support. They also said that it can be hard to meet the needs of students, control their

behavior, and deal with emotional stress without strong leadership and clear communication. The

results show that teachers are dedicated and tough, but they need more time, money, and

consistent support from administrators to make full inclusion work for everyone.

Summary of Findings

The five main themes and three sub-themes in this study show that inclusion can be both

positive and negative for general education teachers. Teachers said they really want to help all of

their students learn, but they have trouble doing so because they do not have enough training, planning time, or support. They also said that it can be hard to meet the needs of students, control their behavior, and deal with emotional stress without strong leadership and clear communication. The results show that teachers are dedicated and resilient, but they need more time and consistent support from administrators to make full inclusion work for everyone.

Limitations

This study had a few limitations that are important to consider when looking at the results. First, the sample size was small, consisting of eight general education teachers from one small, rural school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Because the group was small and came from one district, the results cannot be generalized to every school or teacher. Still, the goal of this study was to understand what these teachers experienced, not to speak for everyone.

Second, all the teachers who took part taught grades K–6 in inclusive classrooms. Teachers who teach special subjects like art, music, or gym, or who work as specialists or administrators, were not included. This means the results only show one group's point of view.

Third, all interviews were done online using Zoom. This made it easier and more convenient to schedule interviews. However, this might have limited the opportunity to build a personal connection or for participants to become comfortable with the researcher compared to meeting in person.

Fourth, the study was based on what teachers said about their own experiences. Sometimes people remember things differently or want to give answers that sound positive. Even though everyone was told their answers would stay private, this could still affect what they shared.

Fifth, the researcher was the only person who interviewed and looked at the data. The MAXQDA program and member checking were used to make the results more accurate, but the researcher's own background and experiences could still have influenced how the results were understood.

Lastly, this district follows a full-inclusion model, which means all students with disabilities stay in the general education classroom all day. Because of that, the results may not apply to schools that use a different kind of inclusion program. These findings are best understood as examples from this one district, not as rules for every school.

Despite these limitations, the study also had several strengths. The interviews gave teachers a chance to share their honest thoughts and ideas, and many common patterns appeared across their stories. Reaching data saturation made the results stronger because new interviews continued to repeat the same ideas. The findings help show what inclusion looks like in a small, rural school district and add important information to the field. The results can help schools and teachers in other small, rural areas learn how to better support inclusion and meet the needs of all students.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on these findings, several actionable steps can help guide school leaders and teachers toward more effective inclusive practices. The results of this study add to what is already known about inclusion in public schools. The results showed that teachers in this small, rural district support inclusion, but they have a lot of roadblocks that make it hard for them to do implement it effectively. These problems include not having enough training in special education, not having enough time to plan, not knowing what administrators expect, and feeling stressed from trying to meet the needs of all students without enough help.

Teachers said that one of the most important things they needed was better training and preparation. Participants said they were not prepared to teach students with disabilities because they were not trained to specifically teach students with disabilities. They also said that professional development is often too general or limited and does not focus on what they really need in their classrooms. More practical, hands-on training in special education and inclusive classroom practices should be available in schools and teacher education programs. In addition, administrators and teachers should receive practical training on how to implement inclusion effectively. This training should include the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers, co-teaching strategies, scheduling and conducting effective collaboration time, planning and differentiating lessons for diverse learners, managing behaviors in inclusive classrooms, and using inclusive language when discussing students with disabilities. Each of these types of training directly supports inclusion by ensuring teachers understand their roles, can collaborate effectively, address diverse student needs, manage classroom challenges, and foster a positive, inclusive environment. The way teachers use language about students can either support or hinder inclusion, and inclusive language helps set high expectations and fosters a culture of inclusion. Teachers would feel more confident and ready to help all students if they received regular, practical, hands-on training that supports both effective instruction and inclusive mindsets.

Collaboration is another area that needs work. Teachers said they do not often have time to meet with special education staff to plan lessons or share ideas. Administrators can help by making sure that co-planning time is set aside and not used for other tasks. Teachers also said they want to be more involved in talks about what successful inclusion looks like in their schools.

Another topic that teachers talked about was staffing. A lot of participants said that there are not enough special education teachers or paraprofessionals to help students the way they need to be helped. Also, they expressed their frustration with how the limited amount of special education teachers are being pulled in so many different directions, such as covering other duties that disrupts their daily schedule, making it impossible for them to be consistent, present, and do their job effectively. This means that general education teachers have to do everything by themselves to teach students with disabilities. To make inclusion work better, schools should put hiring and keeping qualified staff at the top of their list of things to do.

Finally, this study showed that teachers need more emotional, professional, and classroom support. Many participants said they felt stressed, overworked, and unsure of how to balance so many responsibilities on their own. Schools can help by building a stronger culture of support through mentoring programs, recognizing teacher effort, and offering mental health resources, but also by giving teachers more help in their classrooms. This includes adding support staff, giving special education teachers more time to plan and co-teach, and making sure teachers have the tools and materials they need. When teachers feel supported emotionally and in their daily work, they are less likely to feel burned out and more likely to stay positive and effective.

In short, the results of this study show that inclusion works best when teachers have the time, training, and help they need. It is very important for districts that practice inclusion, especially full inclusion, to make sure that general education teachers do not have to do it all by themselves. Schools can make inclusion better for both teachers and students by improving professional development, collaboration, staffing, and teacher support.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings highlighted the experiences of teachers in this context; however, further research is necessary to understand the effectiveness of inclusion in various settings and from different perspectives.

Future studies could include teachers from larger districts, urban or suburban schools, or schools that use different types of inclusion models. This would help researchers see if teachers in other areas face the same challenges or if their experiences are different. It would also be helpful to include special education teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals in future research to get a fuller picture of how inclusion affects everyone in the school.

Another important area for future studies is to explore what kinds of training and professional development make the biggest difference in helping teachers feel prepared. Researchers could look at specific training programs to see which ones help teachers the most with behavior, lesson planning, and collaboration.

Future research should also explore how much general education teachers listen to and modify their instruction based on feedback from their special education colleagues, as this collaboration could influence the effectiveness of inclusion.

It would also be valuable to study how administrative support affects inclusion. Many teachers in this study said they feel unsure and unsupported about what leaders expect. Future studies could explore how communication and leadership styles shape teachers' confidence and success with inclusion.

Future research could look at ways to support teacher well-being in inclusive classrooms. Teachers in this study said they often feel tired, stressed, and overwhelmed. Finding out what kinds of support or school programs reduce stress and prevent burnout would help teachers stay in the profession and make inclusion more effective for everyone.

Lastly, research could also include the perspectives of students with and without disabilities to better understand how inclusion affects their learning and sense of belonging. In addition, collecting and analyzing academic and behavioral data could help determine whether inclusion improves student outcomes and achievement.

Conclusions

This study looked at the challenges K–6 general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The goal was to better understand what their daily experiences are like and what kind of support they need to make inclusion work well. Eight general education teachers from a small, rural district that uses full inclusion shared their stories in interviews.

The results answered the research questions by showing that teachers believe in the importance of inclusion but face big problems that make their jobs harder. They talked about issues like not getting enough training, not having enough time to plan with others, the stress of meeting the needs of many different students, and the fact that administrators don't always support them. Even with these challenges, the teachers showed strong dedication, care, and commitment to helping all students succeed.

These results show that inclusion does not depend only on teachers, rather, it also relies on the systems that support them. Schools need clear expectations, strong leadership, and more chances for teachers to work together and learn new strategies. When teachers feel prepared and supported, inclusion is more effective for both students and staff.

This study adds to what is already known about inclusion by sharing the voices of general education teachers who often face these challenges with limited resources. School leaders and policymakers can learn from their experiences to understand what needs to be done to make

inclusion more successful and realistic. This study looks at teachers in a district that uses full inclusion to understand what they need to make inclusion work better. These needs include more support, clearer expectations, and the right tools to help every student learn.

The findings of this study indicate that educators require time, training, and collaboration to achieve successful inclusion. Schools can make inclusion better by giving teachers more time to plan, better training, and enough staff to help students with disabilities. Future research could build on these findings by exploring how inclusion works in different types of schools, including the voices of teachers, administrators, and students, and studying which kinds of training, leadership, and supports help teachers and students the most.

In short, this study shows that inclusion works best when teachers are valued and supported. Schools benefit when they listen to teachers, give them the help they need, and create a positive culture and learning environment for both teachers and students. When teachers receive the support they need, they can implement inclusion more effectively, which will ultimately improve student learning and behavior.

Appendix A

IRB Approval

SlipperyRock University of Pennsylvania

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
104 MALTBY AVENUE, SUITE 005
SLIPPERY ROCK, PA 16057
724-738-4846
irb@sru.edu

September 9, 2025

Dr. Jason Hilton
Curriculum, Instruction & Educational Leadership

RE: Protocol Approved
        Protocol # 2026-010-17-B
        Protocol Title: Challenges Faced by K-6 General Education Teachers in Teaching Students with
                Disabilities

Dear Dr. Hilton:

Thank you for your new IRB submission. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Slippery Rock University has received and reviewed the above-referenced protocol utilizing the expedited review process. The IRB has approved the protocol under the "expedited" category.

You may begin your project as of September 9, 2025. Your approved protocol will expire on September 8, 2026. You will need to submit a Progress/Final Report at least 7 days prior to the expiration date. Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted approved materials. If any changes need to be made, a Change to Protocol Form must be submitted to the IRB Office for review and approval. A final report is required upon the closure of your research study. These forms can be on the IRB webpage, https://www.sru.edu/offices/institutional-review-board/how-to-apply-to-the-irb.

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to protecting the rights and welfare of human participants. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Office by phone at (724)738-4846 or via e-mail at irb@sru.edu.

Sincerely,

Yvonne Eaton-Stull

Yvonne Eaton-Stull, DSW, LCSW Vice-Chairperson
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Appendix B

Informed Consent

SlipperyRock
University
of Pennsylvania

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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Challenges Faced by K-6 General Education Teachers in Teaching Students with Disabilities

Dr. Jason Hilton

Email: jason.hilton@sru.edu

Phone: 724-738-2307

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

If you choose to participate, you must be a classroom teacher for grades K-6, male or female, and have at least one student with a disability in your classroom. You will be asked to participate in an interview via Zoom. This will take approximately 30 minutes. Taking part in this research project is completely voluntary, and your administration will not know whether or not you choose to participate. Your answers will be kept confidential.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to identify the challenges educators encounter in inclusive environments and to explore what supports and resources would be beneficial in creating more effective and inclusive settings for all students. If you choose to participate, you will be interviewed, at a time that is convenient for you. This will take approximately 30 minutes.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include unease or anxiety during the interview process.
- The study will provide an opportunity for you to provide information about your school district and suggest potential improvements related to inclusive education.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the Study About and Why are We Doing it?

The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classrooms, and to identify what supports or strategies may help create more effective and inclusive learning environments.

What Will Happen if You Take Part in This Study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to consent to participate, schedule a Zoom interview at a time convenient for you, and answer interview questions. We expect this to take about 30 minutes total. During the interview, we may learn about some practices, challenges, or strategies you use in your classroom. When sharing classroom examples, please do not use real student names or

Initials: _____

other identifying details. All information you provide about students will be anonymized to protect their privacy. Administration will not know who chooses to participate, and all of your responses will be kept confidential. The data collected from participants will be used independently and will not be linked or combined with any other external data sources. This helps protect participant privacy and ensures the data remains confidential.

How Could You Benefit From This Study?

You might benefit from being in this study because it gives you the chance to share ideas for improving your school's inclusive education practices. Your responses will be kept confidential, no identifying information will be used, and interview transcripts will only be seen by the researcher. This could help bring better resources and opportunities for both students and educators in the future.

What Risks Might Result From Being in This Study?

You might experience some risks from being in this study. They are discomfort or anxiety during the interview. However, participating in Zoom allows you to respond in a comfortable and familiar environment. The interview recording will be kept confidential and accessed only by the researcher. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you may skip questions or stop the interview entirely without any penalty. Additionally, you can contact the Bradford/Sullivan Co. Department of Mental Health at 570-265-1760 if you wish to seek support. Your responses will remain confidential, and no identifying information about you or your students will be shared.

How Will We Protect Your Information?

I plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, I will not include information that could directly identify you. I will protect the confidentiality of your research records by using coding instead of your name. All research records, including interview files, will be securely stored in a password-protected computer accessible only to me, the researcher. Your name and any other identifying information will be kept separate from the data collected for this study.

What Will Happen to the Information We Collect About You After the Study is Over?

I will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the project. The video-recorded transcripts of the interviews will be destroyed three years after the study concludes.

How Will We Compensate You for Being Part of the Study?

You will receive a $10 Amazon Gift Card for your participation in this study. Compensation is only provided if the interview is fully completed.

What Other Choices do I Have if I Don't Take Part in this Study?

If you choose not to participate, there are no alternatives.

Your Participation in this Research is Voluntary

Initials: _____

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, there is no penalty. If you continue to reschedule or postpone your interview time, you may be terminated from the study.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact **Jillian Blugis at jbm1013@sru.edu or 570-205-9902 or Dr. Jason Hilton at jason.hilton@sru.edu or 724-738-2307.**

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher, please contact the following:

Institutional Review Board
Slippery Rock University
104 Maltby, Suite 302
Slippery Rock, PA 16057
Phone: (724)738-4846
Email: irb@sru.edu

Initials: _____

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I/We will give you a copy of this document for your records. I/We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Consent Form has been given to me.

_____   _____   _____
Printed Participant Name   Signature of Participant   Date

By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and to the best of my knowledge understands the details contained in this document and have been given a copy.

_____   _____   _____
Printed Participant Name   Signature of Participant   Date

Photo/Audiotape/Videotape Release Form:

We request the use of audiotape and videotape material of you as part of our study. The records will be used solely for research purposes, including transcription and analysis, and will not be shared publicly. Regarding the use of your voice and image in audiotape/videotape recording, please check one of the following boxes below:

☐   I do…

☐   I do not…

Give permission for the investigators to utilize audiotapes/videotapes of me for research purposes only.

_____   _____   _____
Print Name   Participant Signature   Date

PLEASE NOTE: Should you choose not to allow your image or voice to be used, we can still benefit from your inclusion as a research study participant.

Initials: _____

Appendix C

Letter to Participants

Good morning!

My name is Jillian Blugis, and I am a Special Education Ed.D. candidate at Slippery Rock University under the advisement of Dr. Jason T. Hilton. I am conducting research for my dissertation titled *Challenges Faced by K–6 General Education Teachers in Teaching Students with Disabilities.*

I am seeking **general education teachers in grades K–6 who teach in inclusive classrooms and have at least one student with a disability** to participate in a voluntary Zoom interview. For this study, a student with a disability is defined as a child who has an Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a written plan for a student with a disability that outlines specific learning goals, accommodations, modifications, and services to support the student's educational needs, and is formally identified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as having a condition such autism spectrum disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment (including blindness) that requires additional support at school. The interview will last **no more than 30 minutes**, and you may choose a time that is most convenient for you. As a thank you for your time, participants will receive a **$10 Amazon gift card**. Interviews will be **recorded** so your responses can be transcribed. Only I will have access to the recordings, and **your identity will be protected** using **pseudonyms**. While your responses will become data I use for analysis, specific responses that you provide will be entirely confidential. You may also turn your camera off if preferred.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without any consequences. Your input will help provide insight into the challenges and experiences of teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, which may inform future professional development and support for teachers.

If you are interested in participating, please **email me at jbm1013@sru.edu**.

Thank you for considering participation in this study. Please feel free to reach out with any questions or for additional information.

Sincerely,
Jillian Blugis, Ed.D. Candidate
Slippery Rock University
jbm1013@sru.edu

Appendix D

Interview Questions for Participants

1. What is your background as an educator?

   - What grade level do you currently teach?

   - How many years have you been teaching?

   - How old are you?

   - What is your highest degree earned?

   - How many students with disabilities do you have in your classroom this year, and how many do you typically serve in a given year?

   - What is your current understanding of inclusion as it relates to special education law?

2. What are the biggest challenges you face as a general Ed teacher when teaching students with disabilities?

3. How do these challenges impact your teaching methods like planning and instruction and classroom management?

4. How do you manage different learning abilities and behavioral challenges?

5. What are the most common challenges you face in implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)? *(An IEP is a written plan for a student with a disability that outlines specific learning goals, accommodations, modifications, and services to support the student's educational needs).*

6. What support systems are currently in place to assist you (e.g., professional development, collaboration with special educators), and how effective are they?

7. What additional support or training do you feel would better serve students with disabilities?

8. What support do you feel you receive from special education staff in regard to teaching students with disabilities?

9. What additional supports (if any) would you like to receive from special education staff?

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about teaching special education students that we did not cover above?

Appendix E

Coding Matrix

Theme	Code	In Vivo Responses
1: Insufficient Training and Professional Development	Need for PD that fits real classroom needs	A – PD on teacher language would be huge. B – Training on how to manage diverse needs E – PD is specialized, needs are specialized H – Nothing comes to mind as a specific PD around special education
	Desire for special ed specific training	D – Any training to help accommodate students, I'd be all for it
	Partially helpful PD	F – Responsive classroom helps behavior and emotions G – PD is in place, bits and pieces are helpful
	Role/boundaries – not wanting special ed role	C – I don't want more training; I'm a regular teacher

2: Limited Collaboration and Planning Time	Limited shared planning time	A – We meet with the learning support teacher once every six-day cycle C – We just started co-planning once a cycle for 20-30 minutes D – We do co-planning once a six-day cycle E – We co-plan every six days for about 20 minutes, we kind of just chat H – We get a co-planning period once every six-day cycle, better than not having it at all
	Schedule conflicts and inconsistent collaboration	B – I change my schedule around so I can do those things when I have extra support in the classroom H – My co-teacher doesn't know what she's doing day-to-day, I don't learn until she knows

	Limited co-teaching	C – If we actually co-taught, that would be great, but we don't truly do it
	Impact of pulling special ed staff for other duties	B – I change my schedule around so I can do those things when I have the extra support in the classroom G – Learning support teachers are constantly pulled to cover other duties H – My co-teacher doesn't know what she's going to be doing on a day-to-day basis
	Positive impact of common planning time	F – Having common planning time with the learning support teacher this year was huge
████████████████	████████████████	████████████████
2a: Positive Relationships with Special Education Teachers	Trust and mutual support	A – My co-teacher doesn't need to be told what to do, she just jumps in. It helps me save relationships with kids D – We do a lot of team things to support each other

		E – I see her every day, so I can usually just catch her if I need to
	Value of co-teaching and collaboration	B – I change my schedule around so I can do things when I have extra support in the classroom F – Having common planning time with the learning support teacher this year was huge. I'm hoping to get some extra practice for some of those low kids H - When my co-teacher is actually co-teaching with me, that's a great support; when she's not in the classroom, it's pretty much zero
	Recognition of effort and dedication	C - I feel like that our few staff members that we have try the hardest G - I know that if I went to any of my learning support

		teachers … they would make time to work with me and figure out what I should do, they go above and beyond
██		
3: Balancing Diverse Student Needs	Differentiating instruction for all learners	A – I probably spend too much time differentiating B – What works one day doesn't necessarily work the next. You have to constantly find new tricks C – I cannot teach full lessons. I have to have a bucket-list approach G – They do what everyone else is doing, but I adapt assessments or pull small groups H – I can only differentiate so much, I don't want it to be slowing down the rest of the students

	Managing behaviors while teaching	E – It's hard to keep the other 15 kids focused F – I have one student I have to have a completely different setup for to avoid trashing the room
	Creativity and patience in meeting needs	A – I put a ton of time into planning the social-emotional piece, who could they sit next to, what modeling should we do D – You might have to teach 18 different ways for 18 different kids
4: Emotional Impact and Teacher Resilience	Emotional exhaustion and persistence	E – It's hard then to keep the other fifteen kids focused F – It's just crazy right now, because I have one that is a huge behavior. Everything's a little bit different with the way that I'm doing things this year

	Guilt and pressure to ask for help	B – Not having to feel less than because we need support
	Feeling overwhelmed by multiple roles	C – It's exhausting and constant becoming a special education teacher on top of being a regular ed teacher
		H – It really feels like a lot of the general education teachers are taking the reins on special education teacher duties, it adds to our plate
		G – It's sad and frustrating when you want to do your best but can't
	Flexibility and patience	A – It took me a long time to get to that point where I'm not just reacting, but digging deeper
		D – Being flexible is the biggest thing. It's okay to take detours to make things work

4a: Teacher Advocacy and Professional Voice	Advocacy and problem-solving through collaboration and teamwork	A – My co-teacher doesn't need to be told what to do; she just jumps in. It helps me save relationships with kids C - I appreciate time and collaboration and working with and how to plan and work with co-teachers
	Speaking up to administration	G – I wrote a proposal and talked with administrators. People need to know full inclusion isn't working for everyone
	Holding high expectations for all students	H – I have high expectations for everybody, whether you have an IEP or not. I don't think our special-needs students are being pushed enough, but in general I don't think the school does

5: Administrative and Systemic Barriers	Lack of classroom support	A – The biggest challenge in implementing IEPs is support in the classroom, sometimes impossible D – Having a paraprofessional or another body in the classroom would be the best thing F – Kindergarten sometimes gets forgotten. We have needs here too. H – She's used in other areas and called to do other things
	Special education staff pulled for other duties	C – Special-ed staff being pulled as subs is a huge disservice G – Of the 46 days that we've been in school, she has been able to follow her schedule and duties as assigned 14 of the 46 days H – She's used in other areas and called to do other things

	Conflicts with inclusion services	B – It's hard being in a small rural school. We send kids out because we don't have the programs to meet their needs E – We don't do pull-out programs anymore. Instruction needs to be provided in our classroom F – We don't do pull-out for learning support kids. We have Title, they'll get pulled out. But if they have a reading goal or a math goal, they're not pulled out for small groups. It's a push-in G – Full inclusion was implemented to save money, but the district can afford a new weight room but not learning support teachers
	Different interpretations of inclusion	E – Different administrations interpret inclusion differently

5a: Conflicting Interpretations of Inclusion Policy	Financial motivations driving inclusion decisions	G – I almost feel like they've doubled down on this. My district is not poor. We could afford more learning support teachers. I don't understand why that's not a priority
	Co-teaching disrupted by staffing issues	B – I change my schedule around so I can do those things when I have the extra support in the classroom G – Learning support teachers are constantly pulled to cover other duties H – My co-teacher is often pulled to cover other classes or duties, which limits the intended benefits of having a co-teaching model
	Need for shared understanding and communication	A – The biggest challenge in implementing IEPs is support in the classroom B – I change my schedule around so I can do those

		things when I have extra support in the classroom
		C – Special-ed staff being pulled as subs is a huge disservice
		G – Full inclusion was implemented to save money, but the district can afford a new weight room but not learning support teachers
		H – Access can be limited even with the co-teacher in the classroom. She's used in other areas and called to do other things

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