

Exploring Teachers' Self-Efficacy in Managing Students with Learning Disabilities in General Education Classrooms

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Abstract: *This qualitative phenomenological study, entitled Exploring Teachers' Self-Efficacy in Managing Students with Learning Disabilities in General Education Classrooms, explored the lived experience of 6 Filipino international teachers in the United States regarding their management of students with learning disabilities (LDs) in general education classrooms relevant to their self-efficacy. The research examined the four sources of self-efficacy—mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional and physiological states—to understand how these shaped teachers' confidence in addressing the academic and behavioral needs of students with learning disabilities. Using semi-structured interviews, the study revealed significant struggles in adapting to the educational system, behavioral issues of learners, the lack of adequate training, and large class sizes. Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience and growth, employing strategies such as differentiation, relationship-building, and collaborative practices. Thematic analysis led to the development of the SEAM Model, which encapsulates the participants' journey toward cultivating self-efficacy. Key findings highlight the importance of school support systems, peer collaboration, and professional development tailored to the needs of culturally diverse educators. The study concludes that while Filipino international teachers initially face barriers, they can develop strong self-efficacy through adaptive practices and a supportive environment. It is recommended that school leaders provide targeted training, inclusive practices, and mentorship programs to support international teachers and promote inclusive education. The SEAM Model can serve as a practical framework for institutions seeking to strengthen teacher self-efficacy and improve outcomes for students with learning disabilities.*

Keywords: differentiated instruction, learning disabilities, professional development, scaffolding, teacher self-efficacy

1. Introduction

The growing teacher shortage in the United States has opened doors for Filipino educators to teach as international teachers, particularly in inclusive classrooms. As of 2023, approximately 14,000 Filipino teachers were working in U.S. public schools, often tasked with accommodating students with learning disabilities in general education settings. Recent data shows that 67% of students with disabilities spend most of their school day in regular classrooms, reflecting a national push for inclusion. However, many Filipino teachers arrive with limited exposure to inclusive practices, creating a gap in readiness. Differences in educational systems, teaching strategies, and cultural understandings of disability can make the

transition challenging, especially without adequate training in U.S. special education laws such as IDEA and Section 504.

Research highlights that effective inclusive education hinges on teacher self-efficacy—the belief in one’s ability to support diverse learners. Filipino teachers, while highly skilled, may initially struggle to implement inclusive practices confidently due to unfamiliarity with classroom management expectations, student-centered approaches, and behavioral support strategies in the U.S. Studies on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) show that targeted professional development can build both competence and confidence. The literature emphasizes that low self-efficacy can limit a teacher’s ability to engage all learners effectively, while strong self-efficacy encourages proactive, inclusive teaching strategies. This is especially vital for international teachers adapting to a new cultural and educational environment.

This study examined how self-efficacy influences Filipino teachers’ management of students with learning disabilities in inclusive U.S. classrooms. Drawing on Bandura’s four sources of self-efficacy—mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional and physiological states—the research explored how these factors shape teaching confidence and classroom outcomes. The findings offer insight into the importance of mentorship, peer modeling, and supportive school environments in boosting self-efficacy. Ultimately, this study aims to guide professional development and support systems to better equip international educators for inclusive teaching, ensuring equitable education for all learners.

Objectives

This study explored how teachers’ personal experiences and external support systems shape their self-efficacy in managing inclusive classrooms. By examining mastery experiences, vicarious learning, feedback, emotional resilience, and perceived support, this research sought to provide insights into the resources and training teachers need to enhance their efficacy in inclusive educational settings.

The research study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do the general education teachers in an inclusive program practice their self-efficacy in managing students with learning disabilities in a general education classroom?
2. What themes emerged based on the significant experiences of the co-participants?
3. What insights were gained by the researcher based on the narrations of the co-participants?
4. What can be created based on the significant narrations?

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education is widely recognized as both a moral imperative and a practical challenge (Ainscow, 2019). Ainscow emphasizes that successful inclusion requires leveraging existing resources, valuing diversity, and removing barriers to participation. Policies must support educators in adapting their methods to meet diverse learner needs while fostering collaboration among teachers, policymakers, and communities. However, sustainable inclusion depends on a "collective will" to create equitable learning environments, necessitating systemic shifts in mindset and resource allocation.

Teacher attitudes significantly influence the implementation of inclusive practices. Saloviita (2019) found that while some educators support inclusion in principle, many resist it due to concerns about increased workload and inadequate support. Positive attitudes correlate with access to resources (e.g., teaching assistants) and self-efficacy (Boyle et al., 2020). Bandura’s

Social Cognitive Theory underscores the role of self-efficacy—teachers’ belief in their ability to manage inclusive classrooms—in shaping motivation and instructional strategies (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2019). Studies reveal that higher self-efficacy predicts more favorable attitudes toward inclusion over time (Savolainen et al., 2022), suggesting that professional development should prioritize confidence-building.

Despite progressive policies, disparities persist in implementation. Norway’s legislative commitment to inclusion contrasts with classroom realities, where teachers lack training and rely on segregated support units (Olsen, 2021). Similarly, Allam and Martin (2021) highlight resource shortages (e.g., curricula, materials) in low-income settings, exacerbating exclusion. Effective collaboration between general and special educators is critical but often hindered by role ambiguity and communication barriers (Paulsrud, 2020). Crispel and Kaspersky (2019) argue that systemic change requires embedding inclusive pedagogy in all teacher training programs, not just special education.

Targeted training enhances teachers’ adaptability and confidence. Byrd and Alexander (2020) identify core competencies for inclusive teaching, including differentiated instruction and Individualized Education Program (IEP) collaboration. Instructional coaching further boosts efficacy in classroom management and student engagement (Walsh et al., 2020). However, Hardy and Woodcock (2023) note that professional development’s impact varies: high-efficacy teachers adopt holistic strategies, while others remain passive recipients.

Teachers’ classroom management practices—more than their attitudes—shape peer acceptance of diverse students (Pietsch & Stubbe, 2020). Prosocial student behaviors and structured environments foster inclusion, underscoring the need for teacher training in social-emotional dynamics.

The cited literature and studies furthered the focus of this research. Ainscow (2019), Salovita (2019), Boyle et al (2020) asserted in their respective studies that appropriate and targeted training and professional development are essential in developing teachers’ positive attitude towards inclusive practices. Access to resources regardless of economic levels and commitment to shared goals are also crucial. Furthermore, Boyle, Anderson, & Allen (2020) emphasized that apart from appropriate training, teachers’ workload must also be examined as they may hinder positive attitude towards inclusive practices.

Moreover, Olsen (2021) reiterated the importance of commitment to inclusion through legislation. He also pointed out the need for collaboration. The idea of collaboration is supported by a study of Paulsrud and Nilholm (2020) where collaboration between regular and special education teachers is vital in supporting students with special needs.

Literature and studies regarding general education classroom identified the need to develop the competencies of general education teachers in managing special education students through ongoing assessments and timely communication of assessment results; exhibiting compassion and patience; and engaging students with curriculum adjustments and modifications. These are indicated in the study of Byrd and Alexander (2020).

Caspel and Kasperk (2019) added that general education teachers who finished coursework in special education experienced a change in their attitudes as well as their ability to effectively implement inclusion in their classrooms. In recent years, the concept of teacher self-efficacy has garnered significant attention within the realm of inclusive education, particularly

concerning the management of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms. Self-efficacy, rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory, is defined as a teacher's belief in their ability to effectively facilitate learning and address diverse student needs (Bandura, 1997). Research indicates that higher levels of self-efficacy correlate with more positive attitudes toward inclusion and enhanced instructional practices (Savolainen et al., 2020). Factors influencing self-efficacy among educators include prior training in special education, collaborative practices with special educators, and access to adequate resources and support systems (Lazarides et al., 2020). Conversely, studies highlight that teachers who perceive themselves as lacking the necessary skills often report feelings of inadequacy, which can hinder their willingness to adopt inclusive practices (Kiel et al., 2019). These findings underscore the importance of targeted professional development and supportive educational environments in fostering teacher self-efficacy, ultimately promoting successful inclusion practices in diverse classroom settings.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to deeply examine the lived experiences of teachers managing students with learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Grounded in the philosophical traditions of Husserl (1931) and Heidegger (1962), phenomenology was selected as it focuses on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes (Mohammed et al., 2020). This approach proved particularly suitable for exploring how teachers develop self-efficacy, implement instructional strategies, and overcome challenges when supporting diverse learners (Aspfors & Fransson, 2022). The research was conducted with six purposefully selected Filipino international teachers from Maricopa High School, chosen based on their varying years of experience to provide rich, diverse perspectives on inclusive education practices.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews lasting 30-60 minutes, guided by the key dimensions of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. These interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was employed for data examination, progressing through stages of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, refinement, and final reporting. This analytical process revealed critical insights into teachers' struggles, effective strategies, and resilience in inclusive settings. Ethical considerations were rigorously maintained throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity through pseudonyms, providing withdrawal rights, and implementing secure data storage protocols. The study's findings were contextualized within existing literature, highlighting both the persistent challenges (Allam & Martin, 2021) and promising practices (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019) in inclusive education. This methodological approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how teachers construct meaning from their experiences while maintaining the highest standards of research integrity and participant protection.

The phenomenological design proved particularly valuable in capturing the complex interplay between individual teacher experiences and broader systemic factors influencing inclusive education. By centering teacher voices and perspectives, the study provided authentic insights into the day-to-day realities of implementing inclusive practices. The rigorous qualitative methodology, combined with strong ethical safeguards and theoretical grounding in Bandura's work, resulted in findings that both contribute to academic discourse and offer practical implications for supporting teachers in diverse classrooms. The study's emphasis on lived

experience as the primary data source allowed for a rich, contextualized understanding of how self-efficacy develops and manifests in inclusive educational settings.

4. Results and Discussion

This study explored the self-efficacy of general education teachers in managing students with learning disabilities within an inclusive classroom setting. Using Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the study examined how mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional/physiological states influence teachers' confidence in handling students with disabilities. The study also aimed to identify challenges, best practices, and areas for improvement in teacher preparation for inclusive education.

Interviews with six general education teachers revealed critical themes that impact their self-efficacy in inclusive classrooms. General education teachers in an inclusive program practice their self-efficacy in managing students with learning disabilities by employing scaffolding techniques, differentiated instruction, peer collaboration, and individualized support. They implement Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) to foster student independence and utilize visual aids, structured routines, and modified assignments to accommodate diverse learning needs. Despite the lack of formal training, teachers develop confidence through experience, problem-solving, and peer learning, ensuring compliance with IEP and 504 accommodations. However, challenges such as behavioral issues, large class sizes, and inconsistent parental involvement affect their confidence. They adapt by advocating for professional development, behavioral intervention plans (BIPs), and administrative support, demonstrating resilience and a commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment.

Four major themes emerged from the co-participants' experiences: Effective Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, which has Peer Collaboration and Support Systems as a sub-theme. Another narrative that emerged is the Struggles of Inclusive Education, which are substantiated by sub-themes: Lack of Specialized Training and Professional Development, the Emotional and Behavioral Component, and Administrative and Systemic challenges. The other two narratives emphasized Advocacy for Change, and Intrinsic Motivation and Resilience.

Several key insights emerged from the teachers' experiences in managing students with learning disabilities. General education teachers feel underprepared in managing students with disabilities due to a lack of specialized training on IEPs, behavioral interventions, and differentiated instruction. Many struggle with classroom disruptions as IEPs often exclude behavior intervention plans (BIPs), leaving them without effective strategies for managing behavioral challenges. Large class sizes further limit their ability to provide individualized support, leading to stress and self-doubt. Teachers rely on peer collaboration and parental support, but structured mentorship programs and consistent parental involvement remain lacking. Despite these obstacles, they remain intrinsically motivated by student progress but emphasize the need for institutional support, targeted training, and administrative reforms to enhance their self-efficacy in inclusive education.

The findings of this study led to the development of the SEAM Model, which highlights four interconnected themes that shape teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms: Struggles, Effective Teaching Strategies, Advocacy for Change, and Motivation and Resilience. Teachers reported ongoing challenges such as large class sizes, lack of specialized training, and limited behavioral support in IEPs. Despite these struggles, they employed adaptive strategies like scaffolding, peer collaboration, and differentiated instruction to support diverse learners. They

also advocated for systemic improvements, including targeted professional development and co-teaching models. Underpinning all these efforts was their strong intrinsic motivation and resilience, sustained by small student successes and collegial support. Together, these themes reflect how general and special education can be seamlessly integrated through a balance of practical strategies, systemic support, and teacher commitment.

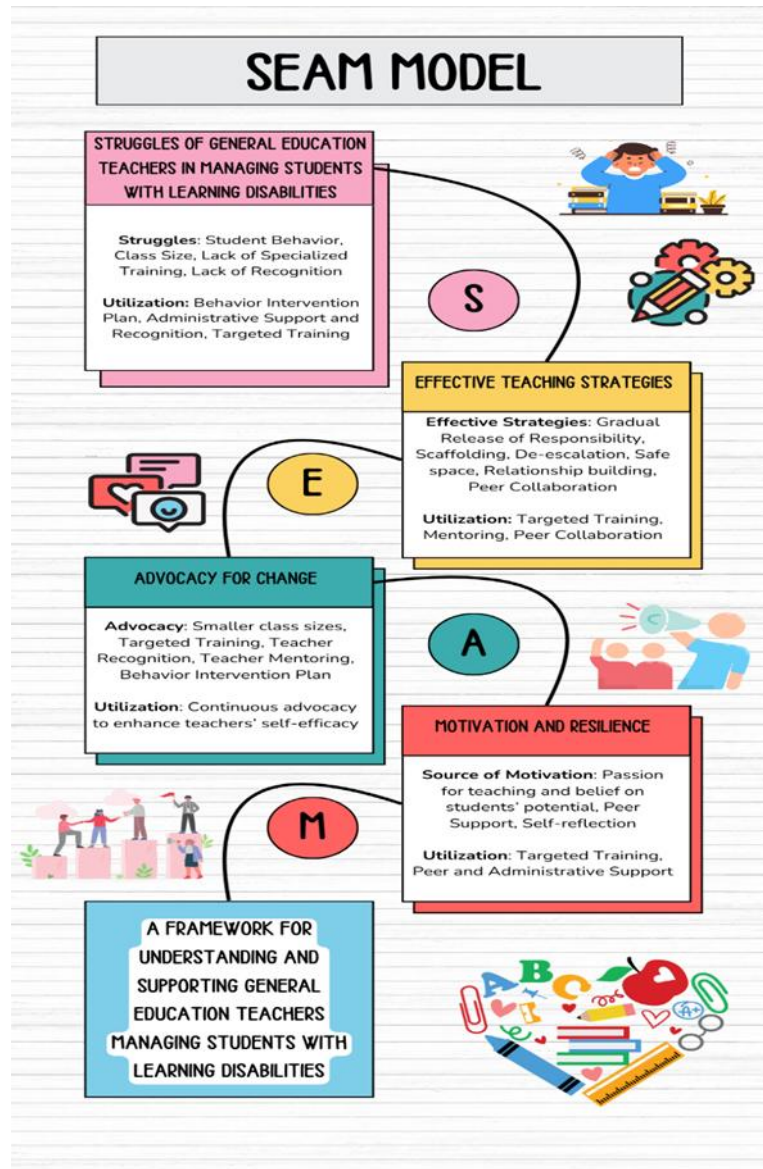


Figure 1: SEAM Model

The SEAM Model is its holistic and interdependent structure. Each component interacts dynamically with the others: struggles inform strategy; strategy prompts advocacy; advocacy is sustained by motivation. In this way, the model serves not only as a diagnostic tool but also as a reflective guide for professional development, institutional improvement, and educational leadership. It offers an evidence-based framework grounded in real classroom experiences, making it highly relevant for teacher training programs, school administrators, and policymakers aiming to support inclusive practices. When utilizing SEAM, it is important to understand the struggles of general education teachers, such as dealing with the behavior of students, large class sizes, lack of targeted training, and lack of recognition. These challenges may serve as a guide for administrators in planning and implementing future professional

development and support for general education teachers. They may consider the effective strategies (scaffolding, differentiated instruction, gradual release of responsibility, de-escalation strategies, peer collaboration, safe space, and relationship building) mentioned by the co-participants as areas to focus on in succeeding training to enhance teachers' self-efficacy. Furthermore, teachers' advocacy for change may be encouraged by participating in a Professional Learning Community where issues can be addressed and advocated. Finally, teachers' motivation to create an impact on students' success may be deepened through mentoring program and institutionalized recognition program.

Moreover, the SEAM Model has potential for adaptability across contexts, especially in settings where inclusive education is still evolving. It recognizes the realities on the ground, validates teachers' efforts, and provides a scaffold for improvement that is both practical and aspirational. The SEAM Model offers a grounded, experience-based framework that reflects the realities and possibilities of inclusive teaching. It serves as both a diagnostic and aspirational tool—acknowledging where teachers are struggling while also highlighting the agency, dedication, and potential they bring to their roles. As such, it can inform teacher training programs, school policies, and educational leadership practices by providing a teacher-informed lens through which inclusive education can be understood, supported, and improved. Taken together, the SEAM Model offers a practical and research-informed tool for teacher preparation programs, educational leaders, and policymakers. It offers a reflective structure that not only explains the interdependent realities of inclusive teaching but also proposes a pathway forward. The struggles (S) inform effective practice (E), which leads to advocacy (A), all of which are sustained by intrinsic motivation and resilience (M). In this way, the SEAM Model does not separate emotional labor from pedagogy or policy from practice—instead, it “stitches” these elements into a cohesive, inclusive framework rooted in teacher experience. By implementing the SEAM Model, institutions can move toward more responsive, equitable, and sustainable inclusive education systems.

In conclusion, the SEAM Model captures the complex, interwoven elements of inclusive teaching. It reflects the voices of educators, honors their struggles, celebrates their strategies and strengths, and amplifies their calls for change. As inclusive education continues to evolve, the SEAM Model offers a grounded, experience-informed framework that can shape future research, training, and systemic reform.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. General education teachers build self-efficacy through strategic instruction, peer collaboration, and continuous adaptation. They use scaffolding, Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR), differentiated instruction, and visual aids to support students with learning disabilities, drawing confidence from IEP accommodations, peer learning, and experience. However, behavioural challenges, large class sizes, and inconsistent parental involvement limit individualized support. Despite these obstacles, teachers remain resilient, advocating for targeted training, peer observation, and systemic reforms to enhance inclusive education.
2. Four key themes shape teachers' self-efficacy in managing students with learning disabilities. They implement scaffolding, differentiation, and peer collaboration but stress the need for structured training. Challenges like lack of specialized training, behavioral issues, and large class sizes hinder confidence. Teachers advocate for smaller classes,

behavioral intervention plans in IEPs, and increased SPED support. Despite obstacles, they remain motivated by student progress, peer collaboration, and dedication to inclusion, highlighting the need for institutional reforms and targeted professional development.

3. Teacher self-efficacy in inclusive education grows through experience, adaptation, and collaboration, despite limited formal training. Teachers build confidence through trial-and-error, peer support, and informal learning, while facing large class sizes, behavioral challenges, and inconsistent parental involvement. Their resilience drives them to seek professional growth, emphasizing the need for structured training, behavioral intervention plans in IEPs, and stronger administrative support.
4. The SEAM Model is proposed to provide a practical and experience-based framework that reflects the real challenges and strengths of general education teachers working with students with learning disabilities. It highlights the interconnected roles of teacher struggles, effective strategies, advocacy, and motivation—elements often overlooked in existing models. SEAM emphasizes the need for seamless collaboration between general and special education, offering a guide for improving teacher support, training, and inclusive practices.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. School Administrators may implement targeted professional development programs. Schools may provide mandatory training on inclusive education, behavioral interventions, and differentiated instruction, ensuring that general education teachers receive competency-based training comparable to that of special education teachers based on the SEAM model.
2. School Administrators may provide additional support staff to allow for more individualized student support, special education teachers may be integrated into general education settings. Co-teaching with special education teachers can be continued.
3. School Administrators may develop peer observation and mentorship programs where teachers can learn from experienced colleagues and receive ongoing mentorship.
4. School Administrators may ensure that IEPs include structured BIPs, equipping teachers with clear guidelines for managing disruptive behaviors and emotional challenges.
5. School Administrators may implement formal recognition programs to acknowledge teachers' efforts in managing students with learning disabilities. Personalized recognition through awards, feedback, and faculty acknowledgments can boost morale, strengthen self-efficacy, and reinforce commitment to inclusive education. Integrating recognition into performance evaluations and professional development can further motivate teachers to refine their strategies.
6. Teachers may advocate for systemic change by engaging in professional development and promoting policies that enhance training, resource allocation, and support systems, while simultaneously refining differentiated instruction and scaffolding strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students.

7. Teachers may establish strong peer networks, engage in co-teaching practices, and consult special education professionals who can help improve instructional strategies and classroom management techniques.
8. Policymakers and educational leaders may institutionalize inclusive education training for all general educators—guided by the SEAM model—through mandatory professional development on learning disabilities, while also increasing budget allocations to fund training, hire additional support staff, and establish inclusive learning environments that effectively address diverse student needs.

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Conflict of Interest

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