INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY IN A MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOM: A PHOTOVOICE STUDY OF A TEACHER'S ADAPTATIONS FOR SLOW LEARNERS

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengalaman mengajar seorang guru Bahasa Inggris umum dalam menangani siswa lambat belajar di kelas dengan kemampuan beragam. Penelitian ini bertujuan menjawab kesenjangan dalam literatur terkait praktik inklusif di konteks pendidikan dengan sumber daya terbatas. Metodologi visual reflektif digunakan untuk mendokumentasikan adaptasi pedagogis yang dilakukan guru. Studi ini dilaksanakan sebagai studi kasus kualitatif tunggal dengan melibatkan satu partisipan, yaitu seorang guru Bahasa Inggris di sekolah menengah pertama swasta di Medan, Indonesia. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi kelas tanpa partisipasi, dan foto-foto yang dihasilkan langsung oleh guru. Metode photovoice memungkinkan guru untuk merefleksikan praktik pengajaran secara kritis dan menangkap narasi visual dari adaptasi yang dilakukan secara langsung di kelas. Analisis tematik mengikuti kerangka dari Patton dan menghasilkan tiga tema utama. Pertama, Tantangan Pengajaran Inklusif mencakup keterbatasan waktu pembelajaran dan variasi kemampuan siswa yang luas. Kedua, Adaptasi Strategis meliputi penggunaan fonik yang disederhanakan, alat bantu visual, serta pengaturan tempat duduk yang fleksibel. Ketiga, Landskap Emosional dan Motivasi menyoroti ketahanan guru, pemikiran reflektif, dan keterlibatan emosional selama proses mengajar. Temuan menekankan pentingnya instruksi terdiferensiasi, pendekatan belajar bertahap (scaffolded learning), serta dukungan berkelanjutan bagi guru demi mewujudkan pendidikan inklusif yang efektif. Penggunaan photovoice tidak hanya memperkaya data kualitatif, tetapi juga meningkatkan kesadaran pedagogis dan agensi guru. Studi ini berkontribusi pada literatur pengajaran inklusif dengan menunjukkan bahwa metodologi visual reflektif mampu mendorong perubahan pembelajaran yang bermakna dan berkelanjutan di kelas dengan keterbatasan sumber daya.

Kata Kunci: disabilitas intelektual, penelitian inklusif, studi photovoice, siswa lambat belajar, perspektif guru

Abstract

This study examined the teaching experiences of a general English teacher working with students who are slow learners in a mixed-ability classroom. Addressing a gap in the literature on inclusive practices in under-resourced educational contexts, this research employed a reflective visual methodology to document pedagogical adaptations. Conducted as a qualitative single-case study, it involved one participant, a general English teacher at a private junior high school in Medan, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and photographs generated by teachers. Photovoice methodology enabled the teacher to critically reflect on real-time teaching practices while capturing visual narratives of classroom adaptations. Thematic analysis, guided by Patton's framework, revealed three central themes. First, the *Challenges of Inclusive Teaching* highlighted limited teaching time and a broad range of student abilities. Second, *Strategic Adaptation* included the use of simplified phonics, visual aids, and flexible seating arrangements to accommodate diverse learning needs. Third, *Emotional Landscape and Motivation* underscored the teacher's resilience, emotional engagement, and capacity for reflective thinking. Findings highlight the importance of differentiated teaching, scaffolded learning approaches, and sustained teacher support to realize inclusive education in mixed-ability settings. The use of photovoice not only generated rich

qualitative data but also enhanced the participant's pedagogical awareness and agency. This study contributes to the growing body of research on inclusive teaching by demonstrating the utility of reflective visual methodologies in promoting meaningful and sustainable teaching change, particularly in low-resource classrooms with learners of varied abilities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right for all citizens, including children with learning disabilities. Inclusive education has become a key global focus, aiming to ensure that every learner, regardless of ability, has equal access to quality education. Interpretations and implementations of inclusion diverge substantially across and within national contexts, influenced by sociocultural, political, and institutional factors (Amor et al., 2019; Artiles et al., 2006; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). These variations stem largely from the necessity to align global policy frameworks with the specific educational ecosystems of individual countries (Magnússon et al., 2019; S. Miles & Singal, 2010). Globally, the inclusive education agenda has been embedded in major educational frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all.

In the Indonesian context, this global commitment is reflected in national educational policies. Article 10 of Law Number 8 of 2016 ensures the right of individuals with disabilities to access education across all types and levels. Complementarily, the Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 70 of 2009 defines inclusive education as a service model that integrates students with special needs into regular classrooms. This includes children with intellectual disabilities and those categorized as slow learners, a group often underrepresented in educational discourse. Despite having exceptional educational requirements, slow learners do not qualify for the special education system, they can continue their studies in non-inclusive courses and participate in the curriculum provided by the government or school (MacMillan et al., 1998). A slow learner is distinct from mental retardation, persons with intellectual disability can attain academic accomplishment, but at a more gradual rate than their classmates. The mean Intelligence Quotient (IQ) of young learners is about 100. However, the IQ scores for sluggish learners often fall between 80 and 90 due to consistent challenges in basic academic tasks, including reasoning, reading, and writing (Jensen, 1980).

Students receiving special needs education encounter several challenges. Their classroom presence is often insufficiently acknowledged, and their requirements are frequently misunderstood. This presents a significant arduous task for educators to assist slow learners in developing their comprehension within mixed-ability classrooms, particularly in the context of English (Khalid, 2018). This is mainly due to the scarcity of educators who are specifically trained to meet the demands of these learners and frequently face students with diverse levels of English proficiency. All children with special educational needs, whether in public or private schools, are required to follow the same curriculum as their peers, including foreign language courses. Since the Indonesian curriculum does not provide specific adaptations for different learning abilities, slow learners in mixed-ability classrooms must also meet these academic requirements without exemptions (Ramadhani & Fithriani, 2022). Indonesia adheres to its national curriculum, nevertheless, several schools also use international curricula, especially the Cambridge curriculum. Cambridge

Assessment International Education textbooks serve internationally minded learners (Johnsen, 2014), whereas Kurikulum Merdeka fits with local culture to augment student involvement (Arshabilla & Nurkhamidah, 2024).

The diversity in curricula poses issues for teachers, who must manage various teaching methodologies while accommodating diverse student demands. Teaching is one of the toughest professions since educators must perform multiple duties. They must possess the qualities of a proficient leader, an articulate speaker, a rapid diagnostician, a diplomatic tactician, and a just, resolute disciplinarian (Sheehy & Rofiah, 2021). According to (Alabdallat et al., 2021), General Teacher (GT) struggles with lesson preparation, resource development, classroom management, and student engagement. These concerns complicate and emotionally strain teachers, emphasizing the need for new pedagogical practices and support structures in inclusive educational contexts. For instance, in Oman, (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2018), and in Czech, (Hubáčková, 2020) revealed that educators possess varying perspectives on the difficulties of slow learners. Individuals with slower learning capabilities often require extended periods to process and apply fundamental skills across various subject areas (Adawiyah & Daulay, 2022). These individuals frequently encounter challenges in sustaining attention and maintaining focus on tasks (Alqallaf, 2016). Educators must adapt their teaching methods to support these students' learning processes, thereby fostering more effective language acquisition and improving overall academic performance.

Given these challenges, the significance of early English language teaching becomes increasingly apparent. English is universally acknowledged as a global lingua franca, its extensive use extends across key global sectors, with a significant number of non-native speakers acquiring English as a second language, thus reinforcing its pervasive presence (Crystal, 2003). Consequently, introducing English at the elementary level provides considerable advantages, facilitating the natural and effective development. GT plays a crucial role in this process by ensuring that students, particularly those with slower learning progress, receive adequate support to enhance their English proficiency. By employing evidence-based pedagogical strategies, educators can foster language fluency in young learners, ultimately equipping them with essential linguistic skills that will benefit their academic and professional endeavors. The diverse composition of classrooms often influences the effectiveness of these strategies, as heterogeneous student populations are a common characteristic across various educational institutions and community-based learning settings (Dash & Das, 2019). While some learners may easily grasp teaching content, others may struggle with comprehension, necessitating differentiated teaching approaches. Moreover, students come from diverse familial and socio-environmental backgrounds, which can further complicate educators' efforts to engage and support all learners in the classroom effectively. To ensure equitable learning outcomes, educators must adopt flexible pedagogical approaches that promote engagement across proficiency levels. To enhance academic progress, structured support mechanisms are essential in ensuring meaningful student participation and optimizing homework as a pedagogical strategy (Gurung & Schwartz, 2009). Recognizing slow learners' strengths and intrinsic abilities can positively reinforce their motivation and encourage academic growth. Due to mood and emotional changes, slow learners sometimes need repeated explanations, according to empirical field research. These regulations force teachers to alter lesson plans, which is complicated by varied classrooms. In Indonesia, it has been noted that many English teachers collaborating with those with intellectual

impairments acknowledge the imperative of establishing a conducive and supportive learning atmosphere to enhance understanding. To tackle these challenges, educators employ content adaptation and lesson plan simplification, which are pivotal in enhancing students' comprehension and retention. Teachers bolster students' understanding of the material by elucidating complex subjects and highlighting key concepts. Nevertheless, content modification alone is inadequate, fostering motivation in slower learners is equally essential. According to (Savić & Prošić-Santovac, 2017), encouraging students to promote active engagement in learning and the completion of assignments. When motivation and teaching modifications are effectively integrated, the educational experience becomes more impactful, facilitating the successful attainment of learning objectives and accommodating the varied learning needs of all students.

More diversified research methodologies are now accessible to ensure the inclusion of slow learners in educational studies. One of the best ways is to actively involve their instructor, who has personal experience of kids' learning issues, progress, and needs. Integrating educator ideas can enhance research, yielding a more thorough comprehension to assist slow learners. Photovoice was established as a framework in the nineties by (C. Wang & Burris, 1997) as a participatory approach, participants are provided with cameras to capture images reflecting their experiences or viewpoints on a certain problem. A photovoice is a procedure employed to identify, portray, and enrich a community using photography techniques (Gant et al., 2009). Photovoice facilitates participant engagement with researchers in the study process, fostering the sharing of perspectives and experiences (Agarwal et al., 2015). As a strategy designed to highlight significant community concerns, Photovoice has been employed across several contexts and demographics, including health, agriculture, climate change, catastrophes, refugee

matters, and education. Numerous studies have employed photovoice as a research approach to investigate participant's perspectives and enhance local evaluation.

This investigation facilitated the documentation of individuals' voices and their aspirations for their lives and communities (Nyambe & Yamauchi, 2022). Hence, several studies employing photovoice as an educational instrument in diverse classroom environments (Herrick et al., 2022; Jehangir et al., 2024; Puteri & Asfihana, 2024; Stroud et al., 2014), its application in special education research, particularly from the perspective of a general teacher, remains largely unexplored. Photovoice promotes participant involvement in the study process, providing significant insights into subjective experiences that are frequently difficult to get from an internal viewpoint. Consequently, the author sought to investigate general teacher (GT) perspectives of special mixed-ability classroom by utilizing photovoice to capture and evaluate the experience in this environment. This research was conducted to answer the research question, "How does a General Teacher address teaching challenges, manage emotional demands, and adapt classroom strategies to support slow learners in English within a mixed-ability classroom?" This study examines GT's difficulties in instructing slow learners, concentrating on their experiences with students involved in English language programs and receiving special education services. The results intend to assist educators in both non-inclusive and special needs environments by improving pedagogical approaches and student performance.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how a general education English teacher supported slow learners within a mixed-ability classroom. A case study approach was particularly appropriate given the need to

examine complex, real-world educational practices where researcher control is limited and the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are fluid (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Photovoice was integrated into the study to foreground the participant's lived experience and agency in a participatory, visual way (C. Wang & Burris, 1997). By enabling the teacher to capture and reflect on classroom moments through photography, photovoice helped surface deeper pedagogical meanings while promoting practitioner voice and reducing hierarchical distance between the researcher and participant (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Mitchell, 2011). Its dialogic potential, especially when combined with reflective interviews, made it particularly useful for investigating inclusive teaching strategies in a nuanced and collaborative manner (Latz, 2017).

The research took place over three weeks at a private junior high school in Medan, Indonesia, chosen for its mixed-ability classroom structure. The sole participant, an in-service English teacher, was purposively selected based on their ongoing experience teaching slow learners and an existing professional rapport with the researcher (Palinkas et al., 2015). This relationship, built upon shared alumni status from the same teacher education program, encouraged trust and communicative openness, thus facilitating richer data collection (Lincoln et al., 1985; Seidman, 2013). Three instruments were used: semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and photovoice-based tasks. Guided by the SHOWeD framework (C. C. Wang, 2006), the teacher took photographs that captured moments of inclusive teaching and classroom challenges, then elaborated on these images during follow-up interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, while observations documented teaching practices and classroom dynamics in situ (Creswell & Poth, 2018), serving as triangulation to support validity (Denzin, 2012).

The data were analyzed thematically using (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase model, emphasizing flexibility and pattern recognition across qualitative sources. Coding was conducted iteratively and inductively across interview transcripts, field notes, and visual data (Saldaña, 2021). These multimodal sources were analyzed in parallel to cross-reference participant narratives, photos, and observed behaviors. Emerging themes were then organized to reflect the teacher's cognitive, emotional, and strategic dimensions of practice. Visual data were displayed alongside interview quotes and field notes in a layered analytic presentation (M. B. Miles et al., 2014). Three key themes emerged: challenges of inclusive teaching, strategic adaptation, and emotional motivation, each grounded in participant voice, classroom photographs, and live observations (Flick, 2014; Tracy, 2010). Conclusions were validated through member checking and a reflexive memo to maintain trustworthiness and transparency.

Ethical considerations were addressed through institutional approval and informed consent from the participant, including specific permission for classroom photography involving students (Allen et al., 2011). Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and data anonymization. A reflexive journal tracked positionality, decision-making, and emerging biases throughout the study (Berger, 2014). Although the single-case design does not support broad generalization, the findings provide transferable insights into inclusive pedagogy in similar educational settings (Stake, 2010). This section concludes with the results drawn from thematic analysis, which examine how the GT perceived and adapted to the needs of slow learners through inclusive and emotionally responsive teaching strategies. The use of both verbal and visual data allowed for a multidimensional and situated portrayal of the teacher's inclusive practice.

3. RESULT

Challenges of Inclusive Teaching

Cognitive and Linguistic Gaps

According to the GT, these challenges significantly impede both receptive and expressive language skills, ultimately disrupting comprehension and verbal fluency during classroom teaching.

> *Their language acquisition is severely limited. For example, they struggle with basic consonant articulation, which often comes out as repeated stammering, like 'K-K' instead of a full word. The 'ng' sound is especially difficult. One student kept trying to say 'menggaga' but it came out broken 'me-ng-ng-ng.' These are the kinds of challenges I face with slow learners.*

Even more pronounced was the inability to produce the velar nasal /ŋ/, a sound frequently encountered in Indonesian morphology. Students frequently produced incorrect phonemes, either by substituting them with incorrect sounds or by omitting them entirely. These patterns led to distorted versions of target words, as demonstrated by utterances such as "Adam" instead of *Adab* or "Melangsanakan" in place of *Melaksanakan*. Such errors reflect a breakdown in phonemic segmentation and synthesis, processes that are critical to early reading and verbal production. The GT observed that these phonological difficulties were compounded by limited working memory, which prevented learners from retaining the full phonological structure of a word long enough to reproduce it accurately.

Reflecting on these persistent challenges, the GT conveyed that the language difficulties exhibited by the slow learners extended far beyond surface-level articulation errors. The students' verbal output was marked by disjointed phonological sequencing, persistent stammering,

and an inability to sustain phonemic continuity across even the simplest lexical items. Such deficits suggested an incomplete internalization of phonological rules and motor-speech coordination, processes that typically develop in early childhood and form the basis for subsequent language and literacy acquisition. As GT described,

> *This is where the difficulty lies with slow learners. We are not even at the stage of teaching grammar or vocabulary yet. This is about the very core of speech. These students are still struggling with phonological awareness and the pronunciation of individual words.*

Differentiated Teaching Dilemmas

The linguistic difficulties described in the preceding section were further compounded by substantial cognitive delays, as verified through formal psychological assessments. These evaluations revealed that several learners possessed intellectual functioning levels more typical of second or third-grade elementary students, even though they were enrolled in Grade 7 of junior high school.

> *In my opinion, these students should already be at a mature age (middle to late adolescence), but their IQ remains stuck at the level of a third or fourth-grade elementary school student. Their IQ is truly below 50, and this is not just an assumption. We received an official diagnosis from a psychologist.*

The GT was simultaneously responsible for delivering a standardized curriculum calibrated to the academic expectations of Grade 7 students and for addressing the fundamental developmental needs of students whose abilities remained rooted in early elementary competencies. It forced the GT to mediate between two incompatible demands: the

institutional expectation to meet curriculum benchmarks and the immediate cognitive needs of learners who had not yet acquired the prerequisite skills to engage with those benchmarks meaningfully. Furthermore, the GT had no formal teaching support. There were no co-teachers, paraprofessionals, or individualized learning assistants present in the classroom. The responsibility for differentiation rested entirely on. GT was expected to act simultaneously as curriculum implementer, developmental diagnostician, and intervention specialist.

Pragmatic and Social Communication Issues

The GT consistently observed that these students were verbally passive and socially withdrawn. They seldom volunteered responses, avoided initiating interaction, and participated minimally in group discussions. Even when directly addressed, their verbal replies were brief, repetitive, and lacked contextual relevance.

> *The students do not talk much, and their vocabulary is limited. When asked, 'Why didn't you do your assignment?' they always answer, 'I forgot.' Whenever they are asked a 5W1H question, their response is always, 'I forgot.'*

For instance, the students rarely asked for clarification when they did not understand the teaching, nor did they provide elaboration when encouraged. It limited their participation in collaborative tasks, group discussions, and peer learning, all of which rely heavily on reciprocal and contextually appropriate language use. The GT observed that the learners appeared emotionally guarded and hesitant to take social risks, often retreating into silence or rote phrases rather than initiating authentic interaction.

Visual Disparities Between Ideal and Actual Practice

Figure 1 presents a structured and symmetrical photograph, which GT described as representing the vision of an ideal classroom environment. The image depicts neatly arranged desks, balanced spatial organization, and the absence of clutter or visual distraction. This vision contrasted starkly with the reality GT described in other parts of the dataset, underscoring the gap between pedagogical ideals and the complexities of actual classroom practice.
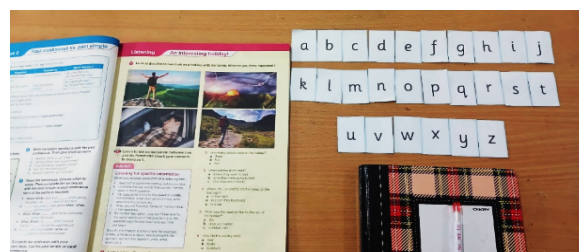

Figure 1. Challenges in Teaching a Mixed-Ability Classroom

> *This is what I imagine the ideal class to be: tidy, calm, organized. When it looks like this, I feel more in control and ready to teach.*

The visual symmetry and minimal distractions signal a space optimized for intentional teaching, where pedagogical routines can be carried out with precision and reduced cognitive load. In this setting, lesson planning is described as more coherent, with teaching materials more easily located, objectives more sharply defined, and transitions more predictably managed. According to the GT, this type of structured learning environment is particularly valuable for students who require consistent routines, simplified input, and frequent repetition, such as those identified as slow learners.

However, the teaching reality diverges considerably from this idealized vision. In contrast, Figure 2 depicts the actual working environment experienced daily. The image shows a classroom space marked by clutter, scattered teaching materials, unfinished student work, and

overlapping teaching tools. The GT explained that this photograph accurately reflects the ongoing adaptations and real-time teaching shifts required when working in a mixed-ability setting.
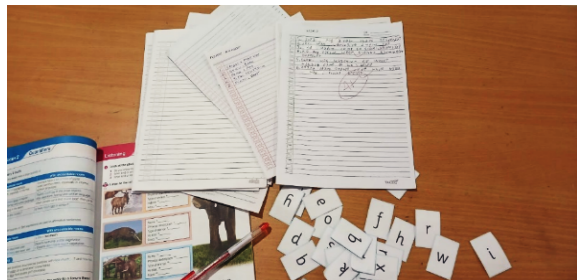

Figure 2. Challenges in Teaching a Mixed-Ability Classroom

The clutter in Figure 2 serves as a visual representation of this multitasking and teaching layering. It also points to the limited availability of time for transition between tasks or reflection on student progress. According to the GT, the environment often feels chaotic and unpredictable. The remark,

> *Sometimes, my classroom feels like this, messy, unpredictable, with so many things happening at once. Especially when I need to help my slow learners while others need attention, too.*

The GT must operate within compressed timelines, shifting rapidly between whole-class teaching and individualized support, without the benefit of planning breaks or external assistance. This environment is not the result of negligence but rather a material reflection of the constant cognitive multitasking demanded by a mixed-ability classroom.

This contrast between Figure 1 and Figure 2 also reflects a deeper pedagogical conflict. Even when teaching begins with a well-developed roadmap, organized materials, and articulated objectives, the unpredictable demands of a mixed-ability classroom frequently disrupt those plans. Learners operate at varying academic and cognitive levels, requiring the GT to make in-the-moment decisions about pacing, scaffolding, and content differentiation. While Figure 1 illustrates the structured clarity that supports ideal teaching delivery, Figure 2 captures the reactive, real-time problem-solving that defines inclusive practice in its most applied form. Teaching in a mixed-ability classroom presents persistent structural and teaching challenges that complicate even the most well-intentioned lesson planning.

Strategic Adaptation

Spatial Arrangement for Proximity-Based Support

A noticeable adjustment made in the physical organization of the classroom involved the intentional placement of learners requiring additional support closer to the GT's desk. This arrangement was not arbitrary but rather a deliberate effort to ensure that those who struggled with the material received frequent, immediate guidance throughout the lesson. By positioning these students within close visual and physical range, the GT was able to offer continuous monitoring, check for understanding more often, and intervene quickly when confusion arose.

> *I sit them close to my table so I can check on them more often, and I give them simpler tasks. Other students work more independently.*

The spatial reconfiguration allowed the GT to create what functioned as a low-profile support zone within the broader classroom, without drawing undue attention to the learners receiving assistance. These tasks were not diluted versions of the same material but thoughtfully adapted to meet the cognitive and linguistic needs of learners who would otherwise disengage when faced with excessive complexity.

Flexible Pacing and Time Management

One of the emerging themes in the data was the perception of time as both an emotional experience and a practical teaching challenge. This insight was vividly captured in Figure 3, which features a photo of a classroom clock. The GT who contributed this image reflected on how the passage of time felt subjectively different depending on the classroom dynamic, particularly when teaching students who required more cognitive support. The GT commented,

> *Time passes differently depending on how I feel. When I'm excited and the lesson is going well, it feels fast. But when it's hard, especially when working with slow learners, it feels so slow and draining.*

Working with slow learners, in particular, introduced a kind of temporal pressure that was not always visible but felt. In such settings, time cannot be treated as a fixed metric. Instead, it must be viewed as a dynamic resource that can be adapted to align with learners' processing needs. For students who grasp content quickly, the lesson may progress rapidly. For those who need more support, time becomes a protective space in which understanding is gradually built.

Figure 3. Strategic Adaptation in Practice Class

Time management, then, emerged not merely as a logistical concern but as a central pedagogical decision point. The GT had to constantly balance the pacing of lessons to maintain engagement for advanced learners while not excluding or overwhelming those who required more time. In this way, time became an implicit marker of equity, where slowing down was not a sign of delay or inefficiency, but a necessary strategy for inclusive practice.

Building a Support Ecosystem

To support students with varying levels of engagement and cognitive development, the GT focused on creating a classroom-based support system that combined social interaction and reflective practice. Two main strategies were central to this effort. First, peer collaboration was used to strengthen learning through shared interaction. The GT designed group activities and pairing arrangements that encouraged mutual assistance among learners. For students who struggled academically, being placed alongside more confident peers provided not only a model for language and behavior but also a sense of belonging. These peer interactions allowed slower learners to feel seen and valued in ways that went beyond academic performance. Rather than isolating students based on ability, the classroom emphasized community, where learners supported one another through dialogue, modeling, and shared tasks.

Second, diary writing was introduced as a simple yet powerful tool for reflection. Students were invited to keep personal journals in which they could record their thoughts, emotions, learning challenges, and small successes. This approach gave learners a private space to explore their academic journeys and process their daily experiences. The diaries also offered the GT insight into each student's emotional and cognitive state, revealing subtle struggles that might not surface during regular classroom interaction. For slow learners in particular, the act of writing without judgment or pressure created a sense of agency and helped build confidence through self-expression.

Emotional Landscape and Motivation

Emotional Triggers and Readiness

The GT described the use of visual stimuli, particularly colorful objects and displays, as a form of emotional priming before entering the teaching space. As illustrated in Figure 4, these visual elements were intentionally placed in the teaching environment to trigger positive emotional responses.

This is when I think the teaching process will run well. Seeing something colorful makes me feel good. When I'm in a good mood, everything seems easier to handle.

This statement reflects a growing awareness of how external sensory cues can be used to regulate internal emotional states. The deliberate use of sensory triggers to evoke calmness and positivity allowed the GT to reset emotionally before the school day began.

Figure 4. Emotional Landscape

This practice of emotional regulation suggests a shift in how resilience is conceptualized. Rather than being viewed as a fixed personality trait, resilience is framed here as a cultivated practice, something developed through reflection, environment, and intentional routine. The GT's experience offers insight into how emotional labor becomes part of

professional preparation. Further deepening this emotional dimension is the symbolic significance of Figure 5, the GT reflected,

That door means a lot. Every day I walk through it, and I never know what kind of energy the day will bring. I have to be strong, especially for my slow learners.

This daily act of entering the classroom becomes more than a routine. It is a ritual of emotional readiness, where the GT braces herself for a complex array of learner needs. In this way, the door becomes a liminal space, both literal and figurative, that marks the transition into a performance of professional care. It is in this moment that the GT prepares herself to regulate her own emotions while also attuning to the needs of her students. This act of emotional labor is often overlooked in formal educational discourse but remains central to the day-to-day realities of inclusive and responsive teaching.

Figure 5. Motivation and Emotion

The act of stepping through the door marked a moment of psychological transition, requiring mental focus and emotional readiness. Taken together, the data reveal that emotional triggers and symbolic routines play a critical role in sustaining the quality of teaching in inclusive contexts. They offer not just comfort but

functional grounding, shaping how the GT prepares to meet learners who require more time, more repetition, and more patience.

Unlike the colorful stimuli, which aim to lift mood, the door represents the anticipation of emotional labor and teaching unpredictability. It is a moment of readiness, where mental and emotional resilience must be summoned before entering a space that demands both consistency and adaptability. Despite their differences, both visual representations share a common pedagogical function.

4. DISCUSSION

In the emotionally dense terrain of inclusive and mixed-ability classrooms, this study reveals that effective teaching hinges not solely on cognitive differentiation but equally on emotional attunement and relational commitment. The GT's preparation before class, mental rehearsal, emotional self-regulation, and affective priming demonstrate how teaching begins before a lesson is even delivered (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2009; Korthagen, 2010). These anticipatory practices, including the symbolic use of calming routines and sensory-rich stimuli, are not mere classroom management tools but manifestations of deeply internalized emotional labor (Noddings, 2012; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). This aligns with pedagogies of attunement, where affective presence acts as a stabilizing force amid the emotional turbulence experienced by slow learners (Chen & Cheng, 2021; Spilt et al., 2011). Through colorful environments and mood-regulating rituals, the teacher creates not just accessible lessons but atmospheres of psychological safety (Conroy et al., 2004; Zentall, 2006). These conditions are vital for students who often carry with them histories of marginalization, disengagement, and academic trauma (McLaughlin et al., 2010; S.Yoon, 2002).

Such emotional scaffolding, however, does not operate in isolation; it is entwined with peer-based strategies that reshape the social architecture of the classroom. The GT's intentional design of peer supports, pairing fluent readers with those struggling, assigning collaborative tasks, and guiding reflective interactions, demonstrates that cognition is inherently social (Sáenz et al., 2005; Topping, 2005). These micro-practices bolster literacy and academic persistence while also reducing the social stigma often faced by slow learners (Denham et al., 2012; Wentzel, 1998). When students support each other within structured, emotionally safe settings, the boundaries between helper and helped blur, reinforcing shared ownership of learning (Forman, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The teacher's supervision ensures these interactions remain equitable and productive, with peer mentorship functioning as a vehicle for both academic and emotional growth (Laursen et al., 2007; Rubie-Davies, 2006).

Rather than fragmenting the teaching process into cognitive and affective domains, the teacher synthesizes them into a cohesive professional presence. Responsive teaching in this context is characterized by adaptive fluency, empathic vigilance, and situated improvisation qualities that transcend standardized models of inclusion (Hall & Simeral, 2017; Zhao, 2012). This reframing positions the teacher not as a deliverer of differentiated strategies but as a relational expert capable of navigating real-time emotional and instructional complexities (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009; Elliott-Johns & Tidwell, 2013). The findings support redefining inclusive expertise as emotionally literate, contextually embedded, and structurally agile (Florian et al., 2010; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). In under-resourced schools, these relational competencies serve as the foundation for meaningful inclusion (Biesta, 2015).

The motivational architecture of the GT's practice challenges conventional assumptions about slow learners. Rather than relying on extrinsic motivators, the teacher promotes mastery orientation and autonomy-supportive

strategies through student choice, reflective writing, and narrative sharing (Midgley et al., 2001). These strategies restore a sense of agency for learners accustomed to failure and position effort as the primary marker of success (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Emotional safety is cultivated through consistent affective signals such as tone, body orientation, and eye contact, which serve as micro-validations of student worth (Goodenow, 1993). Motivation in English Language Teaching contexts emerges from meaningful interaction, responsive feedback, and authentic relational trust. These elements reinforce student motivation and psychological investment in the learning process (Pekrun et al., 2002; Reeve, 2006).

Relational scaffolding, as observed in this classroom, must be reimagined not as peripheral but central to inclusive pedagogy. The GT's ability to recognize social withdrawal, mediate peer dynamics, and design emotionally supportive group tasks illustrates the pedagogical centrality of relationship-building (Hargreaves, 2000). Group-based strategies such as think-pair-share, reciprocal questioning, and dialogic tasks are not simply instructional tools they serve as contexts where learners renegotiate their agency and social roles (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Tharp & Gallimore, 1989). These relational processes develop learners' academic self-concept, resilience, and autonomy, especially for those with a history of exclusion (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Peer-mediated learning provides a cost-effective, culturally adaptable model of inclusive support in resource-constrained schools (Florian et al., 2017).

Ultimately, this study makes visible the often-invisible architecture of inclusive teaching. The teacher's practice, grounded in emotional awareness, responsive motivation, and relationally embedded pedagogy, reflects an integrated model of situated expertise. Teachers do not merely apply strategies—they interpret emotional climates, improvise under pressure,

and sustain a professional ethic of care that transcends procedural frameworks (Day & Gu, 2010). Reflective writing, empathic dialogue, and classroom storytelling are leveraged not only for instruction but for identity reconstruction, allowing learners to reconnect with learning in socially meaningful ways (Day & Leitch, 2001). Especially in under-resourced environments, emotional stamina becomes a form of pedagogical excellence that shapes not only cognitive development but also emotional and social inclusion (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; McCallum & Price, 2010).

6. CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the intricate demands placed on educators working in mixed-ability classrooms, particularly when supporting slow learners through inclusive pedagogical practices. It requires navigating complex emotional, relational, and contextual landscapes with attentiveness and resilience. The GT does not approach her role with fixed strategies alone but with an intuitive capacity to recalibrate, empathize, and respond to subtle affective shifts in GT's learners. This is particularly crucial for slow learners who often exhibit fluctuating engagement and hidden cognitive barriers. Through embodied attentiveness, proximate scaffolding, and emotionally aware classroom rituals, the GT builds an inclusive environment that supports both learning and belonging. Such pedagogical presence is not merely reactive but strategic, deeply grounded in ethical responsiveness and an evolving sense of professional care.

This research advances a novel approach to understanding inclusive teaching by capturing both the visible classroom practices and the often-unseen reflective processes that shape pedagogical decisions. The findings reveal the GT's ability to balance differentiated teaching with emotional labor, demonstrating how effective teaching in diverse settings requires a

synthesis of adaptability, emotional intelligence, and strategic reflection. By highlighting the lived experiences of a general education teacher navigating these challenges, the study contributes original perspectives to the broader discourse on inclusive education, particularly within under-researched mixed-ability environments.

However, the single-case design and reliance on teacher self-reporting limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should expand this research by incorporating diverse participants, student perspectives, and longitudinal designs across various educational contexts. Despite these limitations, the study has significant implications for educational practice and teacher professional development. Ultimately, this research underscores that inclusive and equitable teaching in mixed-ability classrooms demands not only technical skill but also sustained empathy and reflective engagement, contributions that are crucial for advancing the field of inclusive education.

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