Understanding the lived classroom experience: A phenomenological analysis of opportunities and challenges in inclusive education for regular students living with exceptional students

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Abstract

For mainstream students, inclusive education creates both transformative opportunities, such as developing empathy and enhancing cognitive skills, and serious challenges, such as learning disabilities and feelings of injustice. This dichotomy places their lived experience between dynamic social growth and the conflicts of the educational environment, the in-depth analysis of which is essential for optimizing the educational system. The present study is a qualitative research based on a phenomenological approach. The statistical population is elementary school students in District 2 of Sari County in the academic year 1403-1404, who were between 10 and 12 years old. They were selected using purposive sampling method and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the Claise method. The sample size in this study was saturated with 9 samples, and the focus group method was used to validate the research. Then, the data were collected, recorded, and coded using Max Quda 2018 software, and categorized into main and sub-themes. Analysis of the participants' lived experiences led to the identification of 179 primary codes, 50 sub-themes, and 7 main themes. Based on the results of data analysis, the main themes of this study include two categories of themes: challenges and opportunities for coexistence between ordinary and exceptional students in the inclusive classroom. The results of the research showed that positive factors as opportunities for inclusive education include (social-identity growth, cognitive competencies, moral-responsibility capacities, and facilitating mechanisms), and also challenges such as (disruption in the learning process and educational atmosphere, burden of caregiving responsibility, and burnout, and perception of injustice and deprivation) were identified by regular students in the inclusive classroom.

Key Words: Inclusive education, regular students, exceptional students, and opportunities and challenges

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Introduction

Inclusive education has been a trend in special education around the world. Most countries in the world are adopting this movement in education and it has become a priority in many educational settings around the world to provide equitable education for all students, including students with disabilities (Pasumala et al, 2024). This strategy attempts to support each student in realizing their full potential by bringing together every student in a classroom, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses (Akhtar et al, 2023 & Mintz, 2020). Inclusive education involves changing the environment of the conventional education system with a focus on hands-on learning, practical curriculum, appropriate assessment techniques, multi-level teaching approaches, and greater attention to the diverse needs of students (Gholami, 2021).

An educational strategy known as inclusive education supports environments in which every student can learn and feel valued as a member of the wider community (Moriña, 2017) and aims to make education accessible to all students (Khasanah & Salim, 2018). The existence of inclusive educational environments promotes the development of social learning opportunities, facilitates the cultivation of healthy peer relationships, and provides students with disabilities with significant communication models to follow (Ainscow, 2020; Balansag et al., 2018; Slee, 2018). Also, the ultimate goal of this approach, in addition to gaining common general education experiences, is to strengthen social communication, strengthen life skills, and learn by living together regardless of individual differences and their academic performance by creating adaptations in educational materials, teaching methods, and teaching guidelines (Gheyssens et al, 2020 & Tomlinson, 2020).

The idea of inclusive education was first presented at the 1994 UNESCO Conference on Special Needs in Education held in Salamanca, Spain. Inclusive education is a strategy that takes into account the unique needs of each learner by removing barriers from and within the learning environment. The Jomtien World Conference (1990), held in Thailand, declared the goal of "Education for All" and stated that educational opportunities should be available to all to meet their basic learning needs. The right to education applies to all children, regardless of their level of disability (Akhter et al, 2023). This approach in Iran officially began in 1994 in three groups: hearing impaired, visually impaired, and physically disabled, and integration in preschool and elementary schools also began in 2003. The first phase was implemented as a pilot in two provinces, and the second phase was implemented in seven provinces between 2008 and 2010. Then, based on the evaluation results obtained during these two stages, the Supreme Council of Education approved the definitive implementation of this approach in 2011 (Gadami, 2014), and accordingly, the implementation manual was sent to the entire country, and the general education departments were legally required to implement it.

According to Quillen (2018), inclusive education is a growing issue in schools today, moving beyond the assumption that inclusion is about students with special needs to include regular students in the classroom. In the 1980s, the Inclusive Education Initiative Act required classrooms to accommodate diverse students, both regular and special needs. As such, students with special needs spend more than 80% of the school day in the general education classroom with their regular peers (Francisco et al., 2020 & Gilmour, 2018). Systems theory examines the interrelationships and interactions between different components within a system to understand the complex dynamics involved in creating inclusive learning environments, and most countries around the

world have adopted this curriculum innovation (Allam, 2021). . In Sweden, inclusive classrooms promote collaboration and personalized support for students with diverse needs, leading to positive social interactions, academic success, and increased self-esteem for students with special needs. In Canada, inclusive classrooms value diversity and provide a variety of support services, such as assistive technologies and specialized teaching strategies for teachers. In New Zealand, inclusive education focuses on meeting the diverse needs of all students through collaboration between teachers, students, and families, which has led to improved educational outcomes, increased student engagement, and strengthened social relationships among students (Pasumala et al, 2024). According to (Delgado, 2021), inclusive education works because students with disabilities are just as capable as students without disabilities. Therefore, these students can be full members of their classrooms and the local school community. In addition, participating in interactive educational activities alongside peers with special educational needs fosters respect, acceptance of differences, the formation of new friendships, understanding how to help others, and cognitive growth through the process of explaining and learning from peers with special needs (Molina et al., 2021& Florian, 2019). Lev Vygotsky developed a cognitive theory called the sociocultural theory of cognitive development, which believes that children grow and progress through interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Maslow's hierarchy of needs also emphasizes the need for students with disabilities to develop a sense of belonging with their non-disabled peers in the general education setting (Maslow, 1943). Tomlinson (2020) believes that this need to belong is particularly strong in children and therefore in learning and classroom integration, and that the practice of including students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers is crucial to becoming a complete human being, linking this to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, love and belonging. Humanistic education refers to an educational method that enhances the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal development of the individual. According to Khatib et al (2013), the humanistic approach develops student autonomy and places the learner as the main focus of the educational process. This approach prioritizes the importance of individuality, creativity, and critical thinking, which promotes a favorable learning environment. Social constructivism is also an educational theory that states that learning is facilitated through social interaction and the help of others, especially in a group setting (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). This theory argues that individuals' acquisition of new information is influenced by their interactions in a social environment through collaborative learning, peer support, and customized instructional approaches, allowing students of all abilities to succeed and benefit from each other's learning experiences (Natividad, 2022).

Kart & Kart (2021) conducted research that emphasizes the positive outcomes of integrating students with disabilities into regular classroom settings for students without disabilities. Integrating students with disabilities into regular classrooms has been shown to have social benefits for their non-disabled classmates, including reducing fear, hatred, conflict, and prejudice, while consistently encouraging compassion, appreciation, and empathy. Also, a sense of belonging and membership in an environment, positive social relationships and friendships, and learning to the fullest potential are among the desired outcomes of an inclusive experience for both groups of students (Zhang & Hu, 2015). Students gain acceptance and awareness through observation, interaction, and engagement with their peers(Avcioglu, 2017& Vaghrodia, 2022 & Patel).Also, the results of research (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009, Amit &

Palima, 2024, Yang & Rusli, 2012, Powell et al, 2008 & Schroeder, 2018) have shown It has been shown that inclusion benefits children with special needs and typical children, increases friendships and relationships among more students with and without developmental delays, and brings greater emotional benefits to these children, leading to academic success in classroom activities. (2024) Garcia & Renteria, in addition to the effect of small class size on improving learning progress in reading for ordinary students, also stated the positive role of parental support. It should be acknowledged that in addition to all the aforementioned benefits of inclusive educational environments, some regular students may face instances of peer rejection, which can have negative consequences on their social behavior and self-perception (Chen, 2022, Ahmed et al, 2022& Lindner et al., 2023). Furthermore, lack of time and large number of students in classes, rigid curriculum structures, inadequate infrastructure, and knowledge gaps among parents and educators about laws, regulations, and resources related to inclusive education prevent many educators from properly implementing inclusive education ideas (Materechera, 2020 & Zagona et al., 2017). According to the UNESCO report (2021), in contrast to the benefits and opportunities that inclusive education brings to ordinary students, it includes disadvantages and challenges such as inequality in access to resources, quality of education, and lack of teacher training and parent preparation, and addressing these challenges is important for achieving educational equity and effectiveness (Viola & Ainscow, 2023).

What can be concluded from the review of research conducted on inclusive education is that inclusive education is a cry against indifference to differences. Children with special needs should be accepted as members of the community with educational, nurturing and social values, and the physical and educational space should be adapted for them. Doing so requires providing logical reasons, analyzing the disadvantages and advantages, and educating parents and those involved in the educational system. If a culture is not created in society regarding exceptional individuals, the inclusion plan cannot be implemented well and will have the opposite result. However, if a culture is created regarding inclusion and teachers and education professionals acquire sufficient skills for inclusive education, this will be done well and successfully (Sheikhmoradi et al., 2017). The importance and necessity of addressing the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education. Systematic identification of the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education is not only a prerequisite for achieving educational justice, but also a guarantee of social sustainability in the school world (Ainscow, 2020). The consequences of not addressing the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education reinforce vicious cycles that are harmful at multiple levels. At the individual level, the implicit exclusion of exceptional students—despite their physical presence—and the psychological burden placed on regular students (such as empathy fatigue or guilt) threaten the mental health of both groups. At the educational level, ignoring lived experiences leads to a growing gap between official policies and the reality of classrooms; designing educational environments without understanding children's sensory perceptions reduces the quality of learning and institutionalizes symbolic violence. Finally, at the societal level, this neglect undermines the sustainability of schools as small communities.

Therefore, considering what has been discussed and considering the gaps in the subject under study, it is important to mention that it is definitely not possible to study the consequences of this disorder and how ordinary students in educational contexts experience and manage such problems by conducting quantitative research. And since it is more helpful to address a subject as it is experienced by individuals themselves and

to recognize the real meaning that is gained in the daily encounter with these behaviors, methods that can describe these experiences as they are should be used, and those methods are nothing but qualitative research methods, including the phenomenological method. Because the main goal of this method is to examine people's internal experience of phenomena and understand their mental experiences of these events, and it has been chosen because of its unique ability to discover the hidden layers of lived experiences. This is because the challenges of inclusive education, such as the emotional anxiety of ordinary students caused by the movements of hyperactive classmates, are reduced to "surface variables" in conventional quantitative methods (such as the Ministry of Education surveys, 1402) and are unable to record bodily perceptions and unconscious mechanisms that shape relationships. This is while phenomenology, focusing on children's lifeworlds through in-depth interviews, is the only way to access first-hand accounts of experiences that have been largely ignored in Iranian research in favor of adult-centered data. Based on the above, it is not possible to find any research that directly addresses the lived experiences of regular students alongside students with special needs. Therefore, the research seeks to address the fundamental question of how a regular student in an inclusive education classroom experiences and interprets the opportunities and challenges of coexistence with an exceptional studentt?

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative phenomenological method was used to achieve the research goal. Purposeful sampling was conducted among the target population, which is one of the elementary schools in the Do Sari district, and statistical samples of students from the fourth to sixth grades of elementary school in the academic year 1403-1404, who were between 10 and 12 years old. The criteria for entering the interview required that participants be students in grades one through six of the school and have had experience of a time of study alongside an exceptional student. Since students in grades one through three of the primary school in question had not experienced a classmate with special needs alongside them in the classroom, And in a way, younger students may not be able to clearly express their complex feelings and experiences, and also the lack of language and thinking skills necessary to analyze their experiences prevented them from participating in the interview in this study. Interviews were conducted with fourth and sixth grade students who had two to six years of experience being classmates with a student with special needs. The sample size in this study reached saturation with 9 samples. The inclusion criterion for the study was being a classmate of a student with special needs for more than 2 years. The duration of each interview varied from 35 to 45 minutes. The collection of interviews took twenty days. The students' opinions were recorded through semi-structured interviews and numbered to arrive at the main and sub-themes and analyzed using the Claise method. The focus group method was used to achieve the validity of the interview questions.

Research Finding

This section presents the main and sub-themes derived from the data analysis. In each case, direct quotes from the participants' narratives were used to support the themes

and help guide the analysis process. Finally, these themes were collected into a final structure that reflects the participants' experience of the phenomenon in question.

Main and Subthemes

Answer to the first research question: What are the themes from the lived experiences of ordinary students alongside exceptional students as disadvantages and challenges of coexistence in the inclusive classroom?

In response to the research question, the results of the data analysis process from the interviews with the final nine participants are presented. These interviews were coded into 61 initial codes and then grouped by merging many common items into a concept and thematic sentences. Finally, in this study, 3 main themes and 18 subthemes were extracted to highlight the challenges of the inclusive classroom for the average student.

Table 1: Shows the main and sub-themes discovered. In the following discussion, we will explain all 18 sub-themes in detail along with some of the quotes from the students.

Table 1: Main and sub-themes derived from the data analysis as challenges of inclusive education for the average student

Main theme	Subtheme	Sample of Important Student Phrases
	Collective distraction	**When Ali throws his pencil, everyone jumps.**
		One day he threw his pencil in the trash, and everyone in the class laughed.
	Disturbing the classroom atmosphere	**When he bangs his hand on the table, it breaks my concentration.**
		When he bangs his pencil on the table, it's like they're drilling into my brain.
Disruption in the learning process and educational climate	Disrupting the classroom order	**Every ten minutes he gets up and goes into the yard.**
	Continuous interruption of the teaching process	
	Loss of enjoyment of learning	**Sara and I do all the group assignments, but she gets the same grade as everyone else.**
	Feeling of futility of effort	**Why should I study all the lessons myself if the teacher is only busy with one person?**
	Continuous waiting	**Every time the teacher asks us to solve the exercises quickly, we have to wait exactly 10 minutes for Ali to write just the first question.**
	Lack of support in a crowded classroom	**I held my hand up until the bell rang, but my teacher didn't see me at all.**
		The spelling teacher is always above her head.

Caregiving burden and burnout	Feeling of burnout in the responsibility of care	Most of the time I have to sit next to him while he finishes his homework.
		I get tired and frustrated when I explain something to him more than twice and he doesn't write.
	Feeling of exhaustion in the responsibility of care	Most of the time I have to sit next to him to finish his homework.
		I get tired and frustrated when I explain something to him more than twice and he doesn't write.
	Imposition of a parent-like role	His mother tells me that you are like brothers.
	The burden of imposed responsibility	My mom reminds me every morning: Be careful not to fall in the hallway
		My mom always says to watch out for him, but who will watch out for me?
	Feeling of a one-sided duty to care	He doesn't participate in group assignments in class and we have to do them ourselves.
	Feeling of fatigue from taking on responsibility	I have to wait until he's done spelling and then we go play during recess, because I don't have time left.
		He doesn't do everything the teacher says, so I end up drawing it myself.
Perceptions of injustice and deprivation	Perceived injustice	Ali had a spelling mistake, but he got a good grade.
		I wrote three pages for the essay, but he got the same grade as me by writing half a page.
	Confusion in helping	The teacher says: 'Help Ali with his math', but I myself didn't understand question 4
	Suppression of natural curiosity	I can't ask the teacher why he is behaving like this.
	Injustice in the distribution of attention	What's the point?
	Feeling of collective victimization	Because of that, our grades have dropped and because of that, our class is always crowded.

Disruption in the learning process and educational climate

Disruption in learning and the educational environment is a serious challenge in the teaching and learning process. Disruption of classroom order, inability to concentrate, as well as lack of support in a crowded environment, leads to feelings of futility and frustration in students. These issues reduce motivation and enjoyment of learning and negatively affect effective learning opportunities. Also, constant

interruptions in the teaching process force teachers to spend more time restoring order, which can reduce the depth of content and the quality of education. Such a situation not only affects academic performance but also hinders the creation of a positive and creative atmosphere in the classroom. Overall, recognizing and resolving these challenges is essential to improving the quality of education and enhancing students' learning experiences.

Caregiving burden and burnout

Caregiving burden and burnout are complex and multidimensional issues. Feelings of burnout from heavy responsibilities, such as the imposition of parenting roles on typical students, can lead to feelings of fatigue and anxiety. These students may feel that their caregiving duties are one-sided, and this injustice can lead to dissatisfaction and reduced motivation to learn. Furthermore, this burden of responsibility not only affects their mental health, but also their ability to establish positive relationships with their classmates. Consequently, to create a positive learning environment, it is essential that caregiving responsibilities are distributed equitably and that regular students are provided with the necessary supports to prevent their burnout.

Perceptions of injustice and deprivation

Perceptions of injustice and deprivation in the inclusive classroom, especially for regular students, can create serious challenges in the learning process. Students feel victimized when they see the teacher's attention being distributed inappropriately among students. This experience causes confusion in providing help and suppresses their natural curiosity. The feeling of suppression of natural curiosity in inclusive classrooms can be due to the teacher's focus on the specific needs of some students, which leads to less attention to the questions and learning pursuits of other students. This situation may reduce their motivation and educational creativity. Balancing the distribution of attention and educational resources can help improve the lived classroom experience and reduce feelings of injustice, which will ultimately lead to improved classroom climate and academic outcomes.

As a result, inclusive education for ordinary students sometimes becomes a corrosive cycle that wears away three layers of their existence: the mind is exhausted by the burden of imposed caregiving responsibility (parental role) and frequent classroom disruptions (teaching interruptions, collective distractions); the heart is wounded by the perception of discrimination in the distribution of teacher attention and educational resources, and the feeling of being victimized turns the joy of learning into the bitterness of futility; And social relationships are plagued by loneliness in the absence of systemic support (classroom chaos, lack of teaching assistants). In fact, educational systems, by shrugging off responsibility, place the burden of humanization on children; they do not prepare physical and educational environments to accept diversity; and they ignore the needs of the average student.

Response to the second research question: What are the themes from the lived experiences of regular class students alongside exceptional students as benefits and opportunities for coexistence of inclusive education?

In response to the second research question, the results of the data analysis obtained from the analysis of interview sessions with the final nine participants are presented.

These interviews were coded into 118 initial codes and then grouped by merging many common items into a concept and thematic sentences. Finally, in this study, 4 main themes (themes) and 32 sub-themes (categories) were extracted to reveal the phenomenon of a normal student being a classmate alongside his exceptional classmate.

Table 2: Shows the main and sub-themes discovered. In the following discussion, we will explain all 32 sub-themes in detail, along with some of the student quotes and their numbers.

Table 2: Main and sub-themes derived from data analysis as inclusive education opportunities for the average student

Main theme	Subtheme	Sample of Important Student Phrases
Social-identity development	Deepening empathy	Now I understand why they sometimes get upset, it has made me a better person.
	Developing nonverbal communication skills	Now I can understand what my classmate needs without talking.
	Forming a collective identity	We do things better together.
	Emotional flexibility	I no longer get anxious when someone cries, I know how to calm them down.
	Deepening lasting friendships	I like that the teacher asks me to help with some parts of her program and I feel good about being able to help her. We go to each other's houses on the weekends and play.
	Increasing psychological resilience	At first I was a little tired, but now I don't get tired and I don't get upset, because he needs help.
	Reducing discrimination and increasing diversity	I love him just like any other classmate and he's the same size, and it doesn't matter to me.
	Belonging and emotional support in social relationships	I support him a lot and I am biased. When he learns his lesson, I will be happy that he was able to do his homework like us.
	Increasing awareness and changing attitudes in social relationships	I didn't know his behavior and I used to react to his actions and confront him a lot, but now that we've been together for two years, our relationship is very good.
	Empowerment through awareness and acceptance of differences	When I first came to this school, some of his behavior was strange to me and I was afraid of some of his behavior, but I soon accepted him as a classmate like the rest of my classmates.
	Learning through training	When I teach science to Ali, I understand it better myself.
	Strengthening organizational skills	Now I can both write my homework and help others.
	Personalized learning	The teacher finds a special way for everyone to learn.

Cognitive competencies	Multimodal understanding of concepts	Ali sees the subject differently, this gives me new ideas.
	Creative problem-oriented thinking	The idea of building a triangular pasta bridge is very interesting; Tony, hold the ropes and I'll tie the knots.
	Flexibility and optimization	At first, I wanted to teach Ali math with formulas. But when he didn't understand, I taught him with our pencils! Now I've learned new ways to solve problems myself.
	Cognitive resources	
	Internalizing human values	I don't help him because of his grades.
	Ethics of collective care	Now, when Ali is feeling unwell in class, we don't call the teacher or principal and we take care of him ourselves.
Moral-responsible capacities	Understanding the meaning of participatory justice	Now I understand that it is fairer to give different people different opportunities
	Developing moral courage	If someone laughs at my friend, I will defend them.
	Increasing social responsibility	When the fourth graders make fun of Ali, I explain to them that he is sick and not his own.
	Strengthening moral self-confidence	The older kids at school didn't want to let Ali play in their games because of his appearance, but I told them he was the best goalkeeper.
	Voluntary social responsibility	First I write myself, but he tries to write a part, and then when I'm done, I look to see what words he didn't write and tell him and guide him to write.
	Resisting peer pressure	The kids didn't want to play with him, so I said we should play together.
	The role of parental emotional support	My mom said: Helping others makes you grow.
		Whenever he wants help with his homework, his mom asks my mom and I give him the homework.
	The educational structure of the inclusive school	This year, there are very few children in this school and the teacher spends a lot of time on us.
	Support networks as teaching partners	The teacher sits a student down with him once a week to help him.
	Flexible assessment design	
Facilitating mechanisms	Flexible Assessment Design	Because Ali is struggling with reading, the teacher said that this lesson should be a science lesson and presented as an experiment.
	Changing New Teaching Strategies	Our teacher uses games to teach.
	Developing Conflict Resolution Skills	We learned to talk when we have a difference of opinion.

Adapting and Collaborating in Participatory Learning	From the moment he first came to our class, the teacher gave us the responsibility to look after him, check his homework, and encourage him to try harder so that he can progress more with us.
Physical Design of the Educational Space	This school has a large class and there are few of us, and the teacher has arranged our chairs in a horseshoe shape and has complete control over all of us, so we pay more attention to Ali.

Social-Identity Development

In inclusive classrooms, regular students embark on a magical journey of social development. From the very first days, being around classmates with special needs acts like a life coach: the student learns how to see the world from the perspective of others.

This experience becomes the cornerstone of true empathy, not sympathy out of pity, but a deep understanding that says, "I understand you, even if you are different." Gradually, these connections grow into lasting friendships; friendships that extend beyond the classroom walls and continue in the park, at home, and online. These bonds act as a strong shield against adversity. This is where differences are transformed from "something to tolerate" to "a gift to celebrate." At the end of this journey, a major transformation occurs: the student's individual identity becomes intertwined with the collective identity. He or she is no longer "a lonely individual," but "a valuable piece of a human puzzle," whose differences are not only not a threat but also an asset to the team.

Cognitive Competencies

Variety of classroom challenges keeps the mind active. By teaching others, students learn concepts better, find creative solutions, and see things from different angles. Students also develop more agile and creative minds because they are constantly faced with new and different situations. One of the best ways to learn is to teach others. When a student tries to explain a scientific concept to a classmate with special needs (for example, through a drawing or a game), he or she subconsciously understands the subject more deeply. This also strengthens organizational skills over time, as he or she learns how to manage time, allocate resources, and prioritize tasks. But beyond that, a diverse classroom helps students discover their own learning style; for example, when they see a classmate learning math better with a different teaching tool, they think they can use that method too. This is where creativity flourishes and limitations become a beacon for innovation rather than an obstacle. Ultimately, they learn how to use their brains more intelligently, and deeper learning occurs.

Moral-Responsible Capacities

In inclusive classrooms, regular students experience profound moral transformation. They begin to understand that true fairness means paying attention to the specific needs of each person, not treating everyone the same. This understanding lays the foundation for collective responsibility: the student feels, not out of compulsion, but from the heart, that he is a guardian of the rights of others. This process is

accompanied by moral courage. The student who previously feared the judgment of others now confidently defends his classmates who are different. For example, when someone is being made fun of, they stand up and say, "That's wrong!" Ultimately, these experiences transform them into a responsible and caring person who sees their responsibility not as a burden, but as a valuable privilege.

Facilitating mechanisms

Facilitating mechanisms as the engine of educational transformation. By designing an integrated system of reinforcing mechanisms, inclusive education elevates the experience of ordinary students from the level of _tolerating difference_ to _discovering their own capacities_. By creating a dynamic ecosystem in which parental emotional support, school structure, collaborative networks, flexible assessment, innovative teaching strategies, conflict resolution skills, collaborative learning, and physical space design are intertwined, this system not only turns coexistence challenges into opportunities, but also creates a living model of a thriving human society. Parents build the foundations of psychological safety by redefining difference as "diversity"; schools institutionalize structural justice with anti-discrimination laws and inclusive curricula; student support networks foster servant leadership; flexible assessment and multisensory teaching strategies enable deep and creative learning; Conflict resolution and collaborative learning practices enhance emotional intelligence and systems thinking; and intelligent design of learning spaces fosters selective attention and reduced cognitive load. In this paradigm, the average student is no longer a passive spectator, but an active creator of the learning process.

Participants in the present study pointed to factors related to educational and training opportunities in the classroom that lead to academic progress due to increased time spent studying alongside students with special needs, high speed of learning due to repetition of material, increased calm and mutual academic progress, and consolidation of long-term learning.

The above points to the positive opportunities that inclusive education offers to ordinary students. Ordinary students strengthen their social and emotional abilities by interacting and collaborating with exceptional students. This exchange of experience helps to better understand concepts and creates a sense of empathy and responsibility in all students. The result of this interaction will be a dynamic and rich learning environment. Spending more time with students with special needs gives them the opportunity to learn from a variety of learning styles. This diversity strengthens social skills and empathy, and it also helps them think more deeply about the material. Frequent interaction with students with different learning needs improves their analytical and creative abilities, leading to academic success.

Therefore, inclusive education creates a unique opportunity for ordinary students to develop a more multidimensional human being alongside exceptional classmates. This daily coexistence transforms, above all, their social and identity skills: students learn to see differences not as obstacles, but as mirrors for discovering their own potential. This interaction strengthens their deep empathy, ability to read body language, and understanding the value of "belonging to a diverse community," shaping their individual identity in harmony with the larger "we." At the same time, their intellectual abilities flourish in this dynamic environment, and the need to explain concepts to a group with special needs deepens learning. Students understand in practice that fairness means distributing resources based on needs, not just superficial equality, and that the

courage to defend the rights of others is not a distant slogan, but a human duty. Of course, these changes do not happen automatically. The role of knowledgeable teachers in designing participatory activities, the emotional support of families in accepting differences, and the appropriate physical space in the classroom are the wheels that set this engine of growth in motion. Ultimately, the outcome of this experience goes beyond academic skills. Inclusive classes help ordinary students become more empowered human beings in mind, heart, and behavior, building a society that sees differences not as problems but as opportunities for shared growth.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experience of ordinary students of coexistence with exceptional classmates in inclusive classrooms in order to identify hidden challenges and transformative opportunities through in-depth analysis and practical solutions to elevate coexistence from the level of "physical presence" to "meaningful interaction" and pave the way for designing educational environments that respond to the needs of all students.

Inclusive education provides special opportunities for social and identity development for regular students. This interaction with classmates with special needs teaches them how to see the world from other people's perspectives and celebrate differences. The relationships formed create deep and lasting friendships and strengthen a sense of belonging to a group. This experience not only strengthens social courage in the face of judgment from others, but also increases a sense of responsibility and empathy. They have mentioned skills such as empathy, patience and understanding of differences and an increased spirit of cooperation, which shows that these experiences help improve social relationships, strengthen communication skills and increase the spirit of cooperation And it creates a more inclusive and supportive society. Interacting with exceptional students gives regular students the opportunity to learn social and emotional skills. Ultimately, students' identities are transformed in a way that makes them valid and valuable members of a diverse community. In this way, inclusive education teaches them that being human means respecting the dignity of all and accepting differences. Thus, inclusive education not only benefits students with special needs, but also provides an opportunity for academic growth for regular students. In the context of the themes obtained, previous studies have also obtained similar findings, including the studies of Jardinez & Natividad (2024), Avcioglu (2017), Vaghrodia (2022), Natividad (2022), which are in line with the present study. Interacting with exceptional students helps typical students better understand different needs and abilities. For example, a typical student may learn from an exceptional classmate how to be patient and communicate in different ways. These experiences lead to deeper friendships and positive attitudes toward social diversity. For example, collaboration in school group projects can strengthen their sense of solidarity and responsibility. Previous studies have also obtained similar findings in the context of the themes obtained, including the studies of Kart & Kart (2021), Amit & Palima (2024). Parents play a key role in strengthening social relationships and building identities for their typical students with exceptional classmates. They can encourage their children to engage in these positive relationships by fostering understanding and acceptance of diversity. Also, parental support for participation in social and athletic programs can provide a safe space for lasting friendships. These interactions lead to increased empathy, recognition of differences, and the creation of a more diverse and accepting society. Researchers such as Garcia & Renteria (2024), Amit & Palima (2024) have

pointed out in their research findings the positive role of parents in strengthening students' social connections at school, which is in line with the findings of the present study.

In an inclusive education environment, the role of the teacher, the administrator, and the education system is crucial. Teachers must be familiar with students with different needs and use different teaching methods to ensure that both groups of students make the best possible progress. To ensure that both typical and exceptional students succeed in the same classroom, the teacher must pay attention to designing a flexible curriculum that is tailored to the different needs. The program should include activities that help everyone learn. It is also important to have appropriate learning resources and support from the school. For example, the use of technology, teaching aids, or even help from teaching assistants can enhance the quality of learning. Finally, close cooperation and communication between teachers, parents, and rehabilitation professionals is also essential to create a positive and inclusive learning environment. In the context of the themes obtained, previous studies have also obtained similar findings, including the studies of Garcia & Renteria (2024), Materechera (2020), Zagona et al. (2017), which are in line with the present study.

Regular students face many challenges in mainstream classrooms. Lack of motivation may be due to a lack of attention from teachers to their needs or a high focus on students with special needs. Crowded classrooms and erratic behavior by some students can disrupt learning because it becomes difficult to focus on the lesson. Disruption and disorder in the classroom by an exceptional student can have a small negative impact on regular students. When exceptional students exhibit behaviors that disrupt the classroom, other students' concentration decreases. This not only disrupts learning but can also create feelings of frustration and exhaustion in regular students. As a result, they may participate less and lose interest in learning. Also, one of the things that younger regular students mentioned during the interview process is feeling tired from taking on the responsibility of being a teacher's assistant at times in the classroom, which can affect their focus on learning and lead to feelings of pressure and dissatisfaction. As a result, being a helper can, in some cases, cause feelings of burnout in ordinary students instead of creating a sense of cooperation. Research by Chen (2022), Ahmed et al. (2022), Lindner et al. (2023) is in line with the present results and has pointed out these themes. To optimize inclusive education and turn challenges into transformative opportunities, the education system must empower teachers and provide intensive training courses focused on recognizing the physical-emotional needs of exceptional students. This includes reducing class size and designing collaborative spaces. Also, family participation is necessary through awareness sessions for parents of regular students, in order to understand the capabilities of exceptional classmates and teach them how to have constructive conversations about "difference as opportunity." Providing adaptive educational resources, implementing flexible programs, and emphasizing collaborative learning in the form of role-based group projects are other measures that should be considered. This strategic link between a capable teacher, an informed family, a smart classroom, and a flexible schedule not only enhances educational quality, but also transforms ordinary students into responsible citizens, exceptional classmates into accepted members, and society into a more humane ecosystem.

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