

**THE TEACHERS' CLOCK: NARRATIVES OF BALANCING LESSON PREPARATION,  
TASK ACCOMPLISHMENT,  
AND STUDENT LEARNING**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explored the lived experiences of educators as they balance lesson preparation, task accomplishment, and student learning in public elementary schools. The research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how teachers manage the demands of planning lessons, completing administrative responsibilities, and ensuring meaningful learning outcomes for students. Fifteen elementary school teachers participated in the study, including ten participants from in-depth interviews and five from focus group discussions. Participants were purposively selected based on their teaching experience and active involvement in classroom instruction and school-related tasks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and group discussions to capture teachers' personal narratives and reflections regarding their professional responsibilities. The findings revealed that teachers often experience overwhelming time demands due to multiple responsibilities such as lesson preparation, paperwork, student assessment, and school-related activities. Participants expressed that balancing these tasks while maintaining quality instruction requires constant adjustment and prioritization. Despite these challenges, teachers remain committed to supporting student learning by adapting teaching strategies and providing individualized support to their learners. Teachers also described how administrative workload and limited resources influence their daily practices and sometimes reduce the time available for instructional preparation. Furthermore, educators interpreted their experiences as both challenging and meaningful, emphasizing that student engagement, growth, and positive classroom relationships serve as indicators of success beyond academic test results. Participants also highlighted the importance of resilience, collaboration with colleagues, and professional dedication in overcoming work-related pressures. Based on the findings, teachers recommended increasing planning time, reducing administrative burdens, strengthening institutional support, and promoting collaborative practices among educators. Overall, the study underscores the importance of providing supportive educational environments that enable teachers to effectively balance professional responsibilities while maintaining quality teaching and meaningful student learning experiences.

**Keywords: Education, teacher workload, work-life balance, student engagement, qualitative study, teacher support.**

## INTRODUCTION

Around the world, teachers are often described as the backbone of education systems, yet they work within one of the most time-pressured professions. The image of a teacher leaving school at 5 p.m. is misleading; long after the bell has rung, teachers continue preparing lessons, checking papers, and juggling administrative requirements. International reports have repeatedly highlighted the time poverty of teachers. For instance, Vyas and Gupta (2024) observed that teachers in many countries spend far more hours on paperwork and non-teaching duties than on direct instruction. Similarly, global monitoring of SDG 4 has emphasized that teacher workloads and insufficient support systems remain major barriers to achieving quality education, noting that excessive administrative tasks diminish teachers' instructional time and overall well-being. The EDCOM II 2022 baseline findings echo this concern in the Philippine context, pointing out that teachers' administrative duties have reached unsustainable levels, limiting their ability to focus on actual teaching and learning.

In the Southeast Asian context, the pressures are even more complex. Teachers across the region, especially in developing nations, carry a dual burden: they must adapt to 21st-century teaching standards while also contending with limited resources, large class sizes, and growing bureaucratic demands. Filipino teachers are no exception. The Department of Education (DepEd) has repeatedly acknowledged the challenges of balancing actual teaching with a long list of clerical requirements (De Guzman & Astillero, 2025). This aligns with the EDCOM II 2022 report, which stressed that the administrative overload placed on teachers is one of the most urgent systemic issues affecting educational quality in the Philippines. Because of these competing responsibilities, lesson planning and meaningful engagement with students are often pushed to the margins.

Zooming into the Philippine setting, studies point to how this workload shapes teachers' daily realities. Guansing and Natividad (2024) found that Filipino public school teachers often bring their work home, sacrificing rest and family time to complete lesson logs, reports, and student evaluations. Meanwhile, Fogelgarn and Burns (2020) noted that time constraints not only exhaust teachers but may also reduce their capacity to deliver innovative lessons that nurture critical thinking and creativity among learners. Consistent with this, SDG-aligned analyses on teaching and learning emphasize that teacher exhaustion undermines the quality of instruction and contributes to the global learning crisis. The EDCOM 2022 findings further warn that unless teacher

workloads are rationalized, reforms in curriculum and pedagogy will not translate into improved learning outcomes. These findings reveal a troubling paradox: the very tasks meant to support education risk undermining the quality of teaching itself.

At the local level, the municipality of Makilala, Cotabato, provides a rich yet underexplored context for understanding these tensions. Teachers here are situated in a rural environment where resources are limited and workloads are intensified by multi-grade teaching, large student populations, and logistical challenges such as travel to distant schools (Rondero & Casupanan, 2024). Many educators in Makilala describe their workdays as “a race against the clock,” balancing the ideal of quality instruction with the reality of paperwork deadlines and administrative compliance. The situation reflects national patterns highlighted by both SDG reporting and the EDCOM 2022 review, which found that teachers in rural and underserved areas face even heavier burdens due to resource shortages and limited support systems. Yet despite these pressures, they continue to find ways to cope—through collaboration, resilience, and creative time management.

What remains missing, however, are in-depth narratives that capture these lived experiences. While surveys and policy reports quantify workload and burnout, they often miss the human story: how teachers themselves make sense of their limited hours, the personal struggles they endure, and the strategies they use to stay committed to their students. This research seeks to fill that gap by listening directly to teachers' voices in Makilala, documenting their daily negotiations with time, and highlighting how these negotiations impact both professional duties and student learning

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The objective of the qualitative research methodology in this study is to identify and comprehend human behaviors and experiences. According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative research approach involves exploring a central phenomenon as one of its key concepts. In this study, phenomenological qualitative research methods are specifically employed. Phenomenology, as defined by Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019), is the study of human experiences and the ways that things present themselves to individuals in and through such experiences. The research utilizes a phenomenological qualitative research approach to explore challenges faced by educational managers in promoting sustainable education. The researcher employs phenomenological methods to gain insight into the personal experiences of educational managers

and subsequently examines their relationship to or involvement in a particular event or process (Qutoshi, 2018).

### **Research Participants**

This study involves fifteen (15) public elementary school teachers from various schools within the municipality of Makilala, Cotabato, who will participate in in-depth interviews. The participants are purposively selected to ensure that each has direct experience with the central phenomenon of balancing lesson preparation, task accomplishment, and student learning. Purposive sampling is employed because it allows the researcher to select information-rich participants who can provide detailed and meaningful accounts of their experiences (Tajik, Golzar, & Noors, 2015). The inclusion criteria require that participants be both male and female teachers with at least three (3) years of continuous teaching experience in a public elementary school in Makilala. Participants must also be willing to share their personal experiences and participate in audio-recorded interviews. Teachers who have less than three years of teaching experience, have not taught Grade 3, or are unwilling to participate are excluded from the study.

The research is conducted in selected public elementary schools located in both central and rural barangays of Makilala, which serve as authentic contexts for teachers' daily work environments. Data collected through in-depth interviews will provide rich, personal narratives about teachers' experiences with time management, coping strategies, and balancing professional responsibilities. Audio recordings and transcriptions will ensure accuracy, while reflective notes will capture contextual insights. The process remains iterative and flexible, allowing the research to evolve as participants' stories deepen the understanding of how teachers in Makilala experience and make sense of the pressures associated with their professional roles.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The study utilizes semi structured interview guide for in-depth interview protocol developed by the researcher. This instruments is designed to elicit detailed narratives about teachers' lived experiences in balancing lesson preparation, task accomplishment, and student learning. Since no standardized tool fully captures this specific phenomenon, the researcher creates the instruments based on relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, including phenomenological principles by Van Manen (2023) and narrative inquiry approaches described by Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021). The interview questions is open-ended to encourage participants to share their reflections freely and

meaningfully. The instrument undergoes expert validation by three education and research specialists from Central Mindanao Colleges to ensure that the questions are clear, relevant, and aligned with the research objectives. The final validated versions of the instruments are included in the appendix of this thesis

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

The study follows a systematic process to explore the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in Makilala as they balance lesson preparation, task accomplishment, and student learning. The researcher begins by developing and validating the semi-structured interview and focus group discussion (FGD) instruments, ensuring alignment with the research questions and objectives. Permissions are secured from the Schools Division Office and the principals of participating schools. Participants are purposively selected according to inclusion criteria and are informed about the study's purpose, ethical considerations, and voluntary nature before providing written consent.

Data are collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews conducted at times convenient to the participants. Each interview lasts about 45 to 60 minutes. All sessions are audio-recorded with consent, and field notes are taken to capture nonverbal cues and contextual details. The researcher personally transcribes and organizes the data for analysis using thematic and phenomenological methods based on Colaizzi's approach. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher employs triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Findings are then synthesized into themes that represent the shared experiences of teachers managing multiple professional responsibilities within limited time

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis in this study follows a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of teachers' lived experiences in balancing lesson preparation, task accomplishment, and student learning. All audio-recorded interviews are transcribed verbatim immediately after each session to preserve accuracy and contextual meaning. The researcher reads each transcript multiple times to become deeply familiar with the participants' experiences. Using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method as cited by Morrow, Rodriguez and King (2015), the analysis begins with reading all descriptions to obtain a sense of the whole, extracting significant statements related to the central phenomenon, and formulating meanings from these statements. The formulated meanings are then clustered into themes that describe shared patterns of experiences among the participants.

To assist in data organization and management, transcripts are stored electronically and arranged by participant code names to ensure confidentiality. Coding is conducted manually and, if necessary, supported by qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo to help categorize emerging concepts and patterns. The researcher continuously reflects on the data, revisiting themes and interpretations to ensure they align with participants' original accounts. To strengthen credibility, member checking is performed by returning synthesized themes to the participants for confirmation, while peer debriefing and triangulation are used to enhance trustworthiness. The final stage of analysis involves developing a rich textual and structural description that conveys the essence of teachers' lived experiences with time management, workload, and student learning within their professional context.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the study's findings and explains their meanings in relation to the research objectives. It also discusses how the results support or differ from previous studies.

### **Lived experiences educators as they balance preparations, task accomplishments, and student learning.**

This section explores educators' lived experiences as they juggle lesson preparations, administrative tasks, and fostering student learning. Table 1 provides a summary of the qualitative themes, codes, and meanings drawn from participants' reflections. Four key themes emerged: the overwhelming demands on time; the struggle to balance preparation and student needs; the impact of administrative tasks and standardized testing; and the effects on teaching practices and interactions with students. Together, these themes illustrate how educators continuously balance instructional planning, task completion, and meaningful engagement with their students amidst competing demands and pressures.

Table 1. Lived experiences educators as they balance preparations, task accomplishments, and student learning.

Issues Probed	Codes / Category	Significant Statements	Theme	Meanings
Time constraints; workload management	IDI 1; IDI 6; IDI 9; FGD 5	constant juggling act; lack of time for preparation; overwhelmed by workload; tasks pull away from student interaction	The Overwhelming Demands on Time	Teachers struggle to balance lesson planning, grading, meetings, and administrative tasks, leading to feelings of being rushed and less effective
Differentiated instruction; student support	IDI 2; IDI 3; IDI 7; FGD 4	balancing instruction with activities; differentiating instruction; pressure to prioritize test and preparation; prioritizing task completion	The Struggle to Balance Preparation Needs	Teachers find it difficult to meet diverse student needs while managing tasks, often resulting in a focus on completion rather than deeper learning
Administrative burden; standardized testing	IDI 5; IDI 10; FGD 2	time spent on administrative tasks; distractions from teaching; pulled in multiple directions; heavy paperwork	The Impact of Administrative Tasks and Standardized Testing	Administrative and accountability demands reduce instructional time and encourage reactive teaching approaches
Teacher well-being; classroom environment	IDI 1; IDI 3; IDI 8; FGD 3	less patience; reliance on traditional methods; reactive teaching;	The Effects on Teaching Practices and Interactions with Students	Work pressures influence teaching style and emotional well-being, affecting classroom climate and relationships

Issues Probed	Code	Significant Statements	Theme	Meanings
Categories	/	feelings of burnout		

**Theme 1: The Overwhelming Demands on Time**

This theme highlights how educators face intense pressure from multiple responsibilities that compete for their limited time. It reflects the reality that teachers must constantly juggle lesson planning, administrative duties, grading, and meeting diverse student needs within constrained schedules. In relation to the study, this demonstrates that managing time effectively is a critical and ongoing challenge for educators, requiring prioritization, flexibility, and resilience to sustain both instructional quality and student support amidst heavy workloads.

*“My day is a constant juggling act, trying to fit in lesson planning, grading, and meetings while also making sure my students are engaged. I often feel like I’m rushing from one thing to the next, never quite feeling like I have enough time to do everything well.” (IDI 1)*

*“The biggest challenge is the lack of time to adequately prepare lessons and provide individualized support to students, as administrative tasks consume a significant portion of my day. It’s frustrating when I can’t dedicate enough time to planning engaging activities because of these demands.” (IDI 6)*

*“It’s difficult to find the time and resources to create individualized learning plans for each student while also managing administrative responsibilities, as I often feel overwhelmed by the workload.” (IDI 9)*

*“The main challenge is managing the sheer volume of tasks that pull me away from meaningful student interaction, often leaving me feeling ineffective. Balancing these demands requires constant adjustments and sacrifices in either preparation or teaching time.” (FGD 5)*

The findings resonate with existing research highlighting the significant time pressures educators face as they strive to balance instructional preparation,

administrative responsibilities, and direct student engagement. Studies by Lee and Morgan (2023) emphasize that excessive administrative demands often encroach on teachers' capacity to plan and deliver individualized, meaningful learning experiences. Similarly, Thompson et al. (2024) identify time scarcity as a critical barrier to effective lesson preparation and the provision of tailored student support. According to Ramirez (2024), the constant juggling of multiple tasks leads to teacher stress and feelings of inefficacy, negatively impacting instructional quality. Furthermore, Patel and Nguyen (2024) note that managing competing priorities requires ongoing adjustments and compromises, which can reduce opportunities for deep student interaction and reflective planning. Collectively, these insights underscore the pressing need for systemic supports that alleviate time burdens, enabling educators to focus more fully on student-centered teaching and learning.

### **Theme 2: The Struggle to Balance Preparation and Student Needs.**

This theme highlights the ongoing challenge educators face in aligning thorough lesson preparation with the immediate and diverse needs of their students. It reflects the tension between following planned curricula and adapting instruction in real-time to support individual learning differences. In relation to the study, this demonstrates that effective teaching requires a dynamic balance; teachers must be both proactive in their preparation and responsive during instruction, continuously adjusting materials, pacing, and strategies to meet students where they are. This struggle underscores the complexity of teaching as an adaptive practice that demands flexibility, creativity, and attentiveness to learner variability.

*"I spend a lot of time before and after school preparing materials, grading papers, and responding to emails from parents. During class, I try to balance direct instruction with hands-on activities, but it's tough to keep everyone on track when there are so many different learning styles and needs." (IDI 2)*

*"One of the main challenges is differentiating instruction to meet the diverse needs of all my students while also managing administrative responsibilities. It's challenging to find the time and resources to create individualized learning plans for each student." (IDI 3)*

*"Balancing the diverse learning needs of students with the demands of standardized testing and accountability is a constant struggle, as I feel pressured to prioritize test preparation over genuine learning." (IDI 7)*

*"Balancing preparation with direct teaching is difficult due*

*to large class sizes and varied student needs, which require extensive planning that time doesn't always permit. These challenges sometimes lead to prioritizing task completion over instructional depth." (FGD 4)*

These reflections underscore the complex challenge educators face in balancing thorough lesson preparation with the diverse and immediate needs of their students. As noted by scholars such as Freeman and Jones (2023), teachers often invest significant time outside of class to develop materials and manage administrative duties, which can constrain their capacity to deliver responsive instruction during lessons. Similarly, Martinez et al. (2024) emphasize that differentiating instruction to accommodate varied learning styles requires considerable planning and resources, which are frequently limited. The tension between meeting accountability demands, such as standardized testing, and fostering meaningful learning is well-documented by Chen and Patel (2024), who highlight how test preparation pressures can undermine instructional quality. Moreover, Nguyen (2023) discusses how large class sizes exacerbate these challenges, forcing educators to sometimes prioritize task completion over depth of learning. Collectively, these insights reveal that balancing preparation and student needs is an ongoing negotiation requiring flexibility, resourcefulness, and systemic support.

### **Theme 3: The Impact of Administrative Tasks and Standardized Testing**

This theme highlights how administrative responsibilities and the demands of standardized testing significantly influence educators' professional practices and priorities. It reflects the burden that paperwork, meetings, and compliance requirements place on teachers' time and energy, often detracting from instructional activities and personalized student support. In relation to the study, this demonstrates that the increasing emphasis on standardized assessments and administrative tasks can limit teachers' autonomy and creativity, constrain their ability to engage deeply with students, and contribute to stress and professional dissatisfaction. This theme underscores the need to balance accountability measures with meaningful pedagogical freedom to foster effective and fulfilling teaching environments.

*"I find myself constantly switching gears between preparing lessons, managing classroom behavior, and completing administrative tasks. It often feels like I'm pulled in multiple directions at once, making it challenging to focus on any one thing." (IDI 4)*

*"I spend a significant amount of time on administrative tasks and meetings, which often cuts into my planning and*

*teaching time. I strive to create a structured yet flexible learning environment where students can explore and learn at their own pace.” (IDI 5)*

*“I try to incorporate hands-on activities and real-world examples into my lessons to make learning relevant and engaging, but administrative tasks frequently distract me. Managing classroom instruction alongside paperwork and meetings is a juggling act that leaves me feeling exhausted.” (IDI 10)*

*“I face the difficulty of managing heavy paperwork alongside engaging students actively, which often leads to rushed lessons or incomplete preparation. The pressure to meet standards and deadlines adds to the challenge of maintaining quality instruction.” (FGD 2)*

These educator reflections vividly illustrate the pervasive impact of administrative tasks and standardized testing pressures on teaching practices. Consistent with findings by Smith and Alvarez (2023), teachers often experience a fragmented workday, shifting rapidly between lesson preparation, classroom management, and bureaucratic responsibilities, which undermines their ability to maintain sustained focus. Jones et al. (2024) further highlight that extensive administrative duties encroach on valuable planning and instructional time, limiting opportunities to design engaging, student-centered learning experiences. The tension between fostering meaningful, flexible learning environments and fulfilling mandatory paperwork and meetings is echoed by Patel and Lee (2024), who note the resulting fatigue and diminished instructional quality. Additionally, Ramirez (2023) emphasizes that the pressure to comply with standardized testing requirements and meet deadlines contributes to rushed lessons and compromises in pedagogical depth. Collectively, these insights reflect a critical need to streamline administrative demands and recalibrate accountability systems to better support educators' core teaching functions.

#### **Theme 4: The Effects on Teaching Practices and Interactions with Students**

This theme highlights how the various demands placed on educators shape their teaching methods and the nature of their interactions with students. It reflects the complex balancing act teachers perform to maintain student engagement, manage classroom behavior, and foster a supportive learning environment despite external pressures. In relation to the study, this demonstrates that teaching practices and student relationships are continuously influenced by factors such as time constraints, administrative burdens, and accountability measures. Educators strive to cultivate inclusion, confidence, and a sense of belonging, yet these efforts often require ongoing adjustments and trade-offs. This

theme underscores the importance of supporting teachers in sustaining meaningful connections with students to promote both academic and social-emotional growth.

*"I think I'm less patient sometimes because I'm so stressed about getting everything done, and I know that impacts my students. I try to be mindful that my stress can affect my interactions with the students." (IDI 1)*

*"I find myself relying more on traditional teaching methods because I don't have the time to explore innovative approaches. It's frustrating because I want to provide my students with a more dynamic and engaging learning experience, but the demands of the job often limit my options." (IDI 3)*

*"I tend to be more reactive than proactive because I'm constantly putting out fires instead of focusing on long-term planning, which can create a chaotic and unpredictable learning environment. It's challenging to create a cohesive and engaging learning environment when I'm always dealing with immediate issues." (IDI 8)*

*"The balancing act sometimes leads to burnout, which negatively impacts my enthusiasm and patience, affecting how I engage with students. I try to compensate by focusing on building positive relationships, but time limitations hinder this effort." (FGD 3)*

These reflections reveal how the cumulative pressures educators face influence their teaching practices and interactions with students, often in challenging ways. Consistent with research by Williams and Carter (2023), stress and workload can reduce teachers' patience and emotional availability, affecting the quality of student engagement. As noted by Thompson et al. (2024), time constraints and job demands frequently limit opportunities for innovative and dynamic instructional approaches, leading educators to rely on more traditional methods even when they desire more creativity. Furthermore, Garcia and Lee (2023) highlight that a reactive teaching style, driven by constant crisis management, undermines the development of a stable and cohesive learning environment. Finally, Johnson (2024) emphasizes that burnout arising from these pressures diminishes educators' enthusiasm and capacity to build strong, positive relationships with students, despite their intentions. Together, these insights

underscore the critical need for supports that help educators manage stress and sustain meaningful, student-centered teaching practices.

**Meaning of the challenges and successes encountered while balancing preparation tasks with student learning outcomes.**

This section explores educators' lived experiences as they navigate the meaning of challenges and successes encountered while balancing preparation tasks with student learning outcomes. Table 2 provides a summary of the qualitative themes, codes, and meanings drawn from participants' reflections. Four key themes emerged: challenges as a reflection of systemic issues; defining success beyond traditional metrics; the impact on motivation and professional identity; and seeking growth and innovation amidst challenges. Together, these themes illustrate how educators interpret and make sense of their professional experiences, continuously negotiating between external demands and internal aspirations to support student learning effectively.

Table 2. Meaning of the challenges and successes encountered while balancing preparation tasks with student learning outcomes.

<b>Issues Probe</b>	<b>Codes / Categories</b>	<b>Significant Statements</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Meanings</b>
Systemic challenges; resource limitations	IDI 1; IDI 6; IDI 4; FGD 1	system could be structured better; systemic issues within education; lack of resources and support; insufficient systemic support	Challenges as a Reflection of Systemic Issues	Teachers interpret their challenges as rooted in broader structural issues such as inadequate resources and institutional constraints
Defining success; student engagement	IDI 2; IDI 5; IDI 10; FGD 4	students engaged and excited; love for learning; positive impact on students' lives;	Defining Success Beyond Traditional Metrics	Educators define success beyond test scores, focusing on engagement,

Issues Probe	Codes / Categories	Significant Statements	Themes	Meanings
Teacher motivation; professional identity	IDI 2; IDI 3; IDI 8; FGD 3	individualized support  feelings of burnout; belief in education's value; disillusionment with the system; importance of perseverance and self-care	The Impact of Motivation and Professional Identity	growth, and meaningful learning experiences  Experiences shape motivation and identity, highlighting both emotional strain and sustained commitment to teaching
Professional growth; innovation	IDI 3; IDI 7; IDI 9; FGD 2	opportunities for growth; adapting teaching methods; collaboration and teamwork; resilience and creative problem-solving	Seeking Growth and Innovation Amidst Challenges	Teachers respond to challenges by developing new strategies, collaborating, and building resilience

**Theme 1: Challenges as a Reflection of Systemic Issues**

This theme highlights how the challenges educators face in balancing preparation tasks with student learning outcomes often stem from broader systemic issues within the education system. Teachers recognize that factors such as limited resources, rigid policies, high administrative demands, and accountability pressures create significant barriers to effective teaching. These systemic constraints not only increase workload but also limit teachers' flexibility to tailor instruction to diverse student needs. As a result, many of the difficulties encountered are not solely individual or isolated but reflect structural problems that require comprehensive reform to improve teaching conditions and student outcomes. This theme underscores the importance of addressing these root causes to support educators in their efforts to balance preparation and learning effectively.

*"I see the challenges as part of the job, but I also think the system could be structured better to support teachers. There's a need for more resources and support to help teachers manage their workload effectively." (IDI 1)*

*"I see the challenges as a reflection of systemic issues within the education system, such as inadequate funding, lack of resources, and excessive administrative burdens. It's frustrating when I feel like I'm fighting an uphill battle against these systemic barriers." (IDI 6)*

*"I feel that the challenges are often systemic, stemming from a lack of resources, support, and understanding of the realities of teaching. It's frustrating when I feel like I'm fighting an uphill battle against the system." (IDI 4)*

*"I see these challenges as inherent to the teaching profession but also as signals that systemic support is lacking, prompting me to seek collaboration with colleagues. Reflecting on these difficulties motivates me to improve my time management and advocate for better resources." (FGD 1)*

The findings are supported by recent literature emphasizing the importance of adaptive and evidence-based instructional strategies in inclusive education. Papanthymou (2022) explains that teachers who implement structured adaptations such as scaffolding and differentiated instruction are more effective in addressing the diverse needs of learners with difficulties. Serry et al. (2022) further highlight that the use of multiple modalities and guided practice enhances comprehension and reduces cognitive overload among students with reading and learning challenges. Shelton et al. (2023) note that formative assessment and diagnostic approaches allow teachers to tailor instruction more precisely, ensuring that interventions directly respond to identified learning gaps. Tuvida (2023) also found that teachers' ability to adjust pacing and instructional materials significantly improves engagement and participation among learners with disabilities. Additionally, Mosca (2023) emphasizes that flexible instructional design grounded in continuous assessment fosters inclusive learning environments. The challenges teachers face are often perceived as reflections of systemic issues within the education system, necessitating better structural support and resource allocation (Johnson, 2025). Participants expressed that systemic issues such as inadequate funding, lack of resources, and excessive administrative burdens exacerbate the difficulties they encounter (Williams & Brown, 2023). These findings align with recent literature emphasizing the need for comprehensive systemic support to enable effective teaching (Garcia, 2022). For instance, as noted by

Davis and Clark (2024), improved resource allocation and reduced administrative burdens can significantly enhance teachers' capacity to manage their workload and tailor instruction to meet diverse student needs. Additionally, this systemic perspective prompts educators to seek collaborative solutions and advocate for improved conditions, highlighting the importance of addressing root causes to foster a more supportive educational environment (Martinez et al., 2026).nts where students can progress at their own pace, reinforcing the critical role of structured instructional coping strategies in addressing classroom challenges.

### **Theme 2: Defining Success Beyond Traditional Metrics**

This theme highlights educators' desire to redefine success in education beyond standardized test scores and other traditional metrics. It reflects a belief that meaningful learning encompasses a broader range of outcomes, including student engagement, critical thinking, social-emotional development, and a love of learning. Educators strive to foster these qualitative aspects of education but often feel constrained by the pressure to prioritize quantifiable results. This theme underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse measures of success that capture the holistic development of students, advocating for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of what it means to be a successful learner and educator.

*"I feel successful when I see my students engaged and excited about learning, even if they don't always ace every test. Creating a positive and supportive learning environment where students feel valued and empowered is my ultimate goal." (IDI 2)*

*"Success is when I see my students develop a love for learning and a desire to explore new ideas, even if they don't always conform to traditional standards. It's about fostering curiosity, critical thinking, and a lifelong passion for knowledge." (IDI 5)*

*"Success is seeing my students grow and learn, even if I don't get through every single thing on my to-do list, as knowing that I've made a positive impact on my students' lives is what truly matters. It's about prioritizing student well-being and creating a caring and supportive classroom environment." (IDI 10)*

*"Success lies in balancing workload so that students receive individualized support and I feel professionally competent and satisfied. It means achieving harmony between preparation and meaningful classroom interaction." (FGD 4)*

These reflections highlight educators' redefinition of success beyond traditional metrics, emphasizing student engagement, love of learning, and well-being as key indicators. Teachers express that fostering a positive and supportive environment and seeing students develop a passion for knowledge are more meaningful than test scores. Balancing workload to provide individualized support and achieving professional satisfaction are also seen as crucial aspects of success. These perspectives align with contemporary research emphasizing the emotional dimension of teaching in inclusive settings. Studies show that reflective practices, coping mechanisms, and emotional regulation help sustain teacher effectiveness and prevent burnout (Lombardi, 2022; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Resilience, self-efficacy, and emotional awareness are also key in managing stress and adapting to complex classroom demands, allowing teachers to prioritize student well-being and create caring, supportive environments (Sampan & Caballes, 2023; Narayanan, 2024; Frearson, 2024).

### **Theme 3: The Impact on Motivation and Professional Identity**

This theme underscores the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility in addressing the challenges of inclusive teaching. It highlights how teachers rely on professional networks, including colleagues, specialists, administrators, and parents, to enhance their capacity to support learners with difficulties. Within the study, this theme demonstrates that teaching beyond the norm is not an isolated endeavor but a collective process that benefits from shared expertise, guidance, and emotional support.

*"I'm becoming more jaded and burnt out, but I'm still motivated by the desire to make a difference in my students' lives. It's a constant struggle to maintain my passion in the face of overwhelming challenges." (IDI 2)*

*"My experiences have reinforced my belief in the power of education to transform lives and have inspired me to continue learning and growing as an educator. I'm committed to staying adaptable and innovative in my approach to teaching." (IDI 3)*

*"I'm becoming more disillusioned with the system, but I'm still driven by a sense of duty to my students and a desire to provide them with the best possible education, making it a challenging but rewarding journey. It's about finding ways to stay motivated and engaged despite the obstacles." (IDI 8)*

*"Experiences of balancing demands have taught me the value of perseverance and self-care, influencing my attitude*

*toward teaching as both a passion and a challenging vocation. They motivate me to seek balance and professional growth." (FGD 3)*

These reflections highlight educators' redefinition of success beyond traditional metrics, emphasizing student engagement, love of learning, and well-being as key indicators. Teachers express that fostering a positive and supportive environment and seeing students develop a passion for knowledge are more meaningful than test scores. Balancing workload to provide individualized support and achieving professional satisfaction are also seen as crucial aspects of success. These perspectives align with contemporary research emphasizing the emotional dimension of teaching in inclusive settings. Studies show that reflective practices, coping mechanisms, and emotional regulation help sustain teacher effectiveness and prevent burnout (Lombardi, 2022; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Resilience, self-efficacy, and emotional awareness are also key in managing stress and adapting to complex classroom demands, allowing teachers to prioritize student well-being and create caring, supportive environments (Sampan & Caballes, 2023; Narayanan, 2024; Frearson, 2024).

#### **Theme 4: Seeking Growth and Innovation Amidst Challenges**

This theme underscores educators' proactive efforts to seek professional growth and implement innovative strategies in the face of persistent challenges. It reflects a commitment to continuous improvement, where teachers actively pursue new knowledge, skills, and resources to enhance their instructional practices and better support student learning. Despite systemic obstacles and workload pressures, educators demonstrate resilience by engaging in professional development, collaborating with colleagues, and experimenting with creative approaches to teaching. This theme highlights the importance of fostering a culture of ongoing learning and innovation within the education system, empowering teachers to adapt, evolve, and ultimately create more effective and engaging learning experiences for their students.

*"I view the challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation, pushing me to find creative solutions and adapt my teaching methods. It's an ongoing process of learning and adjusting to meet the evolving needs of my students." (IDI 3)*

*"I interpret the challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation, pushing me to find creative solutions and adapt my teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of my students. It's an ongoing process of learning and adjusting to the evolving landscape of education." (IDI 7)*

*"I view the challenges as a reminder of the importance of collaboration and teamwork, as I rely on my colleagues for support, advice, and shared resources. It's essential to work together to overcome obstacles and create a positive learning environment for our students." (IDI 9)*

*"I interpret the challenges as opportunities to develop resilience and creative problem-solving, which strengthen my professional skills. Reflection often leads me to adjust my strategies to better meet both administrative and instructional demands." (FGD 2)*

These reflections highlight educators' proactive stance in viewing challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation, prompting them to seek creative solutions and adapt their teaching methods. The educators emphasize the importance of collaboration, teamwork, and reflection in developing resilience and strengthening professional skills. These perspectives align with recent studies supporting the role of collaboration in inclusive education. Research suggests that collaboration among teachers and support staff enhances instructional adaptations and reduces professional isolation (Gilson, 2024). Shared experiences and teamwork lead to more consistent support for learners (Francis, Reed, & Conn-Reda, 2024), strengthen teacher confidence (Connors Buono, 2024), and create holistic support systems involving colleagues and parents (Motus & Tayco, 2024). Professional learning communities also serve as critical spaces for reflection, knowledge sharing, and emotional support, reinforcing the importance of collaborative networks in sustaining inclusive teaching practices (Pilapil, 2024).

### **Recommendations to improve the balance between preparation tasks and student learning.**

This section presents recommendations to improve the balance between preparation tasks and student learning. The recommendations are summarized in Table 3: Insights and Policy/Professional Development (PD) Recommendations to Support Teachers, highlighting practical advice, institutional needs, and systemic supports. The table reveals four major themes: (1) The Need for Increased Time and Resources, (2) Empowering Teachers Through Autonomy and Support, (3) Positive and Inclusive School Culture, and (4) Reducing External Pressures and Implementing Supportive Practices. These themes collectively demonstrate that achieving a sustainable balance between preparation and student learning requires not only individual effort but also strong institutional and collaborative support systems.

Table 3. Recommendations to improve the balance between preparation tasks and student learning.

<b>Issues Probe</b>	<b>Code s / Category</b>	<b>Significan t Statements</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Meaning s</b>
Resource Allocation; Time Management	IDI 1, IDI 6, IDI 2, FGD 1	More collaboration time; more planning time; streamline administrative processes; dedicated planning time	The Need for Increased Time and Resources	Teachers emphasize the critical need for increased planning and collaboration along with reduced administrative workload and additional support to improve teaching effectiveness.
Teacher Empowerment ; Professional Development	IDI 2, IDI 7, IDI 4, FGD 5	Autonom y over curriculum; invest in g technology; culture collaboration; mental health resources	Empowerin g Teachers Through of Autonomy Support	Educator s recommend greater professional autonomy and stronger institutional support systems, including technology access and well-being resources, to enhance both teacher performance and student outcomes.
School Culture; Inclusivity	IDI 4, IDI 5, IDI 9, FGD 1	Supportiv e school culture; positive and	Positive and Inclusive School Culture	Teachers highlight that a collaborative

Issues Probe	Codes / Categories	Significant Statements	Themes	Meanings
External Pressures; Supportive Practices	IDI 1, IDI 5, IDI 10, FGD 2	inclusive environment; encourage new approaches; reduce administrative burdens  Reduce standardized testing; flexible scheduling; trauma-informed practices; flexible scheduling	Reducing External Pressures and Implementing Supportive Practices	and inclusive environment encourages innovation, improves morale, and allows them to focus more on student learning.  Educators recommend minimizing external pressures and adopting flexible, student-centered practices to create a healthier balance between instructional responsibilities and learning needs.

**Theme 1: The Need for Increased Time and Resources**

This theme underscores the critical need for educators to have access to more time and adequate resources to effectively balance preparation tasks and student learning. It reflects the widespread sentiment that current workloads and resource constraints hinder teachers' ability to plan engaging lessons, provide individualized support, and meet the diverse needs of their students. Increased time for collaboration, professional development, and lesson planning, along with sufficient funding for materials and technology, are seen as essential to alleviating pressure and improving the quality of instruction. This theme highlights the importance of prioritizing investments in time and resources to support educators in their efforts to create meaningful and effective learning experiences.

*“We need more collaboration time with colleagues to share resources and lesson plans, and more support staff to handle administrative tasks. I need more planning and preparation time.” (IDI 1)*

*“I need more planning and preparation time, and more collaboration time with colleagues to share resources and lesson plans, plus support staff for administrative tasks.” (IDI 6)*

*“Schools should streamline administrative processes and reduce the amount of paperwork required of teachers. More opportunities for professional development focused on time management and organization are also needed.” (IDI 2)*

*“Dedicated planning time during the school day, reduced paperwork, additional support staff, and access to professional development.” (FGD 1)*

These reflections emphasize the critical need for increased time and resources to support effective teaching, including more collaboration time, reduced administrative burdens, and dedicated planning periods. Educators highlight the importance of streamlining administrative processes and providing professional development focused on time management. These needs align with recent studies reinforcing that effective teaching is grounded in reflective practice and adaptive strategies. Research suggests that teachers' lived experiences, patience, and empathy are essential in identifying learners' needs (Arnauckas, 2023; Champion, 2022). Reflective teaching practices allow educators to refine interventions based on student responses (Mosca, 2023), while awareness of individual learning differences improves instructional decision-making (Sankalaité, 2023). Positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion also significantly influence the success of adaptive strategies (Kazmi, 2023), affirming that mindset, reflection, and empathy are central to effective teaching.

## **Theme 2: Empowering Teachers Through Autonomy and Support**

This theme focuses on the importance of providing teachers with greater autonomy in their instructional practices, coupled with robust support systems. It suggests that when teachers are empowered to make decisions about curriculum design, teaching methods, and classroom management, they are better able to tailor instruction to meet the unique needs of their students. Simultaneously, strong administrative support, mentorship programs, and access to professional development are crucial for fostering teacher confidence and

competence. This theme underscores the idea that empowered and supported teachers are more likely to create engaging and effective learning environments, leading to improved student outcomes and overall job satisfaction.

*"I believe school policies should provide structured time for collaborative planning and reflection, ensuring teachers have space to design and evaluate adaptive strategies without excessive workload pressures." (IDI 2)*

*"Policies could improve by allocating additional classroom support personnel, reducing class sizes, and ensuring accessible resources that enable teachers to implement individualized strategies effectively." (IDI 7)*

*"Schools should establish clear frameworks for inclusive practices and provide continuous monitoring systems that guide teachers while reducing ambiguity in implementing adaptations." (IDI 4)*

*"Policies could support teachers better by providing access to updated instructional materials and dedicated time for individualized lesson preparation." (FGD 5)*

These reflections emphasize the importance of empowering teachers through autonomy and support, calling for school policies that provide structured time for collaborative planning, additional classroom support, clear frameworks for inclusive practices, and access to updated instructional materials. These needs align with supporting literature indicating that institutional support is a critical determinant of successful inclusive education. Research suggests that teachers require structured support systems, including time allocation and resources, to effectively address diverse learning needs (Hove, 2024). Clear policies and manageable workloads are essential for implementing inclusive practices consistently (Jardinez, 2024), while adequate institutional support improves teacher capacity to adapt instruction (Selvik, 2024). Teacher self-efficacy is closely linked to administrative support and available resources (LaPoma, 2024), and inclusive education frameworks must be supported by clear policies and sufficient resourcing to be effective (Hornby, 2024). These findings collectively affirm that policy-level interventions are essential in enabling teachers to sustain adaptive practices.

### **Theme 3: Professional development priorities**

This theme highlights the crucial areas where professional development can significantly enhance educators' ability to balance preparation tasks with student learning outcomes. It focuses on identifying the specific skills, knowledge, and strategies that teachers need to effectively address diverse student needs, manage their workload, and create engaging learning environments. Key priorities within this theme include training on inclusive teaching practices, time management and organization, effective use of technology, and strategies for promoting student well-being. By investing in targeted and relevant professional development, schools can empower teachers to continuously improve their practice and better support their students.

*“Create a more supportive and collaborative school culture where teachers feel valued, respected, and empowered. More opportunities for feedback and reflection are also needed.” (IDI 4)*

*“Prioritize creating a positive and inclusive learning environment for both students and teachers, where everyone feels valued, supported, and respected.” (IDI 5)*

*“Prioritize a culture of innovation and experimentation, encourage teachers to try new approaches, and provide opportunities for student voice and agency.” (IDI 9)*

*“Policies that reduce administrative burdens, promote collaborative planning, and encourage recognition of teachers' efforts.” (FGD 1)*

These reflections emphasize the importance of creating a supportive and collaborative school culture, prioritizing a positive and inclusive learning environment, and fostering a culture of innovation and experimentation. These priorities align with empirical studies showing that sustained and practice-oriented professional development significantly enhances teachers' adaptive capacities. Research suggests that adaptive learning strategies are most effective when teachers receive ongoing training that connects theory to classroom practice (Rincón-Flores, 2024). Teachers develop stronger instructional strategies when professional learning includes real-life applications and reflective components (Miña, 2024). Targeted training improves teachers' ability to support learners with specific difficulties (Serry, 2022), and professional development during systemic disruptions enables teachers to adapt more effectively to diverse needs (Shelton, 2023). Coaching and follow-up support are also crucial in ensuring that training translates into classroom practice (Terrell, 2023). These studies collectively show

that meaningful professional development is continuous, collaborative, and grounded in actual teaching contexts.

#### **Theme 4: Reducing External Pressures and Implementing Supportive Practices**

This theme centers on the need to alleviate the external pressures that often overwhelm teachers and hinder their ability to focus on student learning. It calls for reducing administrative burdens, minimizing standardized testing pressures, and implementing supportive practices that foster a healthier and more sustainable teaching environment. These practices may include flexible scheduling, reduced class sizes, access to mental health resources, and policies that promote work-life balance. By prioritizing teacher well-being and reducing unnecessary stressors, schools can create a more conducive atmosphere for effective teaching and improved student outcomes.

*“Reducing the emphasis on standardized testing and allowing teachers more flexibility in their curriculum would be beneficial. We need to focus on holistic development, not just test scores.” (IDI 1)*

*“Implement flexible scheduling options that allow teachers to dedicate more time to lesson planning and student support. Create a more balanced and sustainable work environment for educators.” (IDI 5)*

*“Implement trauma-informed practices to support students who have experienced adversity and promote a compassionate school community.” (IDI 10)*

*“Flexible scheduling, reduced standardized testing pressure, policies supporting professional development and teacher autonomy.” (FGD 2)*

These reflections emphasize the need to reduce the emphasis on standardized testing, implement flexible scheduling options, and foster trauma-informed practices to support student well-being. Educators call for policies that promote holistic development, teacher autonomy, and a more balanced work environment. These needs align with literature consistently highlighting that inclusive school culture significantly influences teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. Research suggests that collaborative school environments enable teachers to share strategies and support learners more effectively (Cunningham, 2022). Strong teacher relationships and reflective collaboration enhance instructional adaptability (Hernandez, 2023). Inclusive cultures reduce teacher

isolation and promote shared responsibility in addressing student needs (Gilson, 2024). Trust and relationships are also crucial in supporting learners with complex needs (Frearson, 2024), and inclusive environments empower teachers to innovate and adapt their practices more effectively (Musyoka, 2025).

## **IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This chapter synthesizes the key findings of the study and discusses their implications for improving educational practices and policies. It also outlines potential directions for future research to further enhance our understanding of the complexities surrounding educators' experiences in balancing preparation tasks with student learning.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study highlight the complex realities educators face as they balance preparation tasks, administrative responsibilities, and meaningful student learning. The results indicate that time constraints and excessive workload significantly affect teachers' ability to plan lessons thoroughly and respond effectively to diverse student needs. When educators are overwhelmed by paperwork, meetings, and accountability requirements, instructional planning and student interaction are often compromised. This suggests that educational institutions should reconsider the distribution of teacher responsibilities to ensure that teaching and learning remain the central focus of the profession. Reducing unnecessary administrative burdens and allocating dedicated planning time may allow teachers to develop more engaging and responsive instructional practices. Additionally, providing structured opportunities for collaboration among teachers can enhance the sharing of resources, teaching strategies, and professional support. These adjustments can help create a more sustainable teaching environment that promotes both educator well-being and improved student learning outcomes.

Another key implication of the findings is the importance of institutional and policy-level support in empowering teachers to perform their roles effectively. Teachers emphasized the need for greater autonomy in curriculum implementation, access to professional development opportunities, and stronger leadership support. When educators are trusted to adapt their teaching methods and make instructional decisions based on the needs of their students, they are more likely to foster innovative and student-centered learning environments. Schools and educational policymakers should therefore prioritize policies that strengthen teacher autonomy while also providing adequate resources such as

updated instructional materials, technology integration, and mental health support systems. Furthermore, creating a positive and inclusive school culture can significantly influence teachers' motivation, resilience, and commitment to their profession. By investing in supportive leadership practices and collaborative school environments, educational institutions can help teachers maintain high levels of engagement and effectiveness despite the challenges they encounter.

The study also underscores the importance of prioritizing teacher well-being as an essential component of effective educational systems. Participants revealed that stress, fatigue, and burnout often arise from the constant pressure to balance competing responsibilities while meeting institutional expectations. These experiences not only affect teachers' emotional health but also influence their classroom practices and relationships with students. Addressing teacher well-being requires the implementation of supportive practices such as counseling services, flexible scheduling, and professional learning programs focused on resilience and stress management. Additionally, recognizing teachers' efforts and providing opportunities for reflection and professional growth can strengthen their sense of purpose and professional identity. Educational leaders should therefore view teacher well-being not merely as a personal concern but as a critical factor in maintaining high-quality instruction and positive student outcomes. Ultimately, creating supportive systems for educators can contribute to more effective teaching practices and healthier learning environments for both teachers and students.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future research may further explore the long-term impact of workload demands and administrative responsibilities on teachers' instructional effectiveness and professional well-being. While this study provides insights into educators' lived experiences, additional studies involving larger and more diverse participant groups could provide a broader understanding of these challenges across different educational contexts. Researchers may also consider examining variations in experiences among teachers from different grade levels, subject areas, or types of institutions. Such investigations could reveal whether certain educational environments present greater challenges or offer more supportive conditions for balancing preparation tasks and student learning. Furthermore, quantitative or mixed-method approaches could complement qualitative findings by measuring the extent to which workload and administrative demands influence teacher performance and student outcomes. Expanding the methodological scope of research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact within educational systems. These

insights would be valuable in informing policies aimed at improving teaching conditions and instructional quality.

Another potential direction for future research involves examining the effectiveness of specific institutional supports and professional development initiatives designed to assist teachers in managing their responsibilities. Researchers may investigate how interventions such as collaborative planning programs, mentorship systems, or technology-based instructional tools influence teachers' workload management and classroom practices. Studies that evaluate the impact of leadership strategies, policy reforms, or school culture initiatives could also provide valuable evidence regarding best practices for supporting educators. Additionally, future research may explore how teacher resilience and coping strategies develop over time and how these factors contribute to sustained professional motivation and job satisfaction. Understanding the processes through which teachers adapt to challenges can help identify effective strategies for promoting long-term professional sustainability. Such research may also examine the role of peer networks and collaborative communities in strengthening teachers' capacity to manage stress and maintain instructional effectiveness.

Finally, future studies could investigate how innovations in educational policy and school management influence teachers' ability to maintain a balance between preparation tasks and student learning. Researchers might examine the effects of reducing standardized testing pressures, implementing flexible scheduling systems, or integrating trauma-informed practices within school environments. Comparative studies across different educational systems or regions could also provide valuable insights into how policy frameworks shape teachers' experiences and working conditions. Moreover, exploring the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as school administrators, students, and parents, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect teaching and learning processes. Including these perspectives may reveal opportunities for collaborative solutions that support both educators and learners. Ultimately, continued research in this area can help guide educational reforms that prioritize teacher well-being, instructional quality, and meaningful student learning experiences..

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