JRIIE Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education
Center for Research Implications & Practice

Website: www.jriiejournal.com ISSN 2520-7504 (Online) Vol.10, Iss.4, 2026 (pp. 1316 - 1325)

# Teachers' Perceptions regarding School-Based Professional Development for Supporting Learners with Autism in Kongwa District, Tanzania

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**Abstract:** *School-based professional development (SB-PD) is designed to align teacher learning with classroom realities, yet its effectiveness for inclusive education depends on curriculum relevance and delivery models. This study investigated the content, delivery methods, administrative support systems, and student experiences associated with SB-PD initiatives implemented in primary schools across Kongwa District, Tanzania, focusing specifically on their capacity to support teachers working with autistic learners. Adopting a qualitative approach from administrative interviews with Heads of Schools and a review of professional development records. Findings reveal a critical leadership-execution gap exists: school administrators rely on informal verbal encouragement and subjective general observations rather than structural support or autism-specific competency metrics. Student perspectives reveal a significant help gap driven by overcrowded classrooms (80+ students), heavy chalkboard reliance, and a total absence of specialized autism-support tools such as visual timers or sensory checklists, resulting in an unmanaged reliance on peer support (proxy teaching). The study concludes that current SB-PD operates as a tokenistic, content-heavy framework detached from the specialized demands of inclusive classrooms, functioning as bureaucratic inclusion. It recommends institutionalizing autism-focused modules, structured peer-coaching networks, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, and administrative accountability frameworks within school-based professional learning.*

**Keywords:** *Autism, Inclusion, Teachers, Professional development, administrative support*

**How to cite this work (APA):**

Mwasongwe, S. & Opanga, D. (2026). Teachers' Perceptions regarding School-Based Professional Development for Supporting Learners with Autism in Kongwa District, Tanzania. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education, 10*(4), 1316 – 1325. **https://doi.org/10.59765/jy82k**

## 1. Introduction

Enhancing instructional quality relies fundamentally on teacher professional development, as educational reforms and inclusive education policies ultimately depend on what educators can implement inside their classrooms. Modern scholarship increasingly emphasizes that professional learning is most effective when it is sustained, connected to daily teaching tasks, focused on relevant content, and structured around active learning rather than one-off information transmission (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). School-based professional development is particularly vital in resource-limited systems because it minimizes travel expenses, utilizes local expertise, and targets context-specific challenges arising in individual classrooms.

For over a decade, Tanzania has promoted school-based teacher development to expand access to in-service learning. Evidence from regional and national pilot frameworks demonstrated that school-based training fosters more interactive instructional methods when supported by structured materials, appropriate facilitation, and systematic follow-up (Hardman et al., 2011). Prior Tanzanian research likewise highlighted that educators value professional development when it directly relates to classroom practice and offers collaborative opportunities for professional exchange (Komba & Nkumbi, 2008). Nevertheless, policy intentions do not guarantee that school-level professional learning occurs frequently, possesses specialized depth, or remains pedagogically rich, with existing literature pointing to persistent concerns regarding irregular scheduling, resource shortages, and minimal specialization for inclusive education.

These challenges intensify when educators must support autistic learners within mainstream classrooms. Professional learning concerning autism requires specialized knowledge beyond general awareness. A systematic review by Petersson-Bloom et al. (2023) established that professional development for educators teaching autistic students is optimized through autism-specific content and practice-based learning addressing localized classroom obstacles. Similarly, broader educational research emphasizes that practical exercises, constructive performance feedback, and on-site coaching are essential components of in-service training focused on evidence-based practices for students with developmental disabilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Petersson-Bloom et al., 2023). Consequently, professional development centered primarily on general subject matter or administrative routines leaves teachers without the targeted strategies required for effective communication, behavior support, visual structuring, differentiated instruction, and student participation.

This study examined the effectiveness of school-based teacher professional development in public primary schools, with its primary objective focused on determining the content and delivery methods of existing SB-PD initiatives. This paper isolates the objective to provide a targeted evaluation of training topics, frequency, and delivery mechanisms. The investigation was guided by the research question: what are the teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the SB-PD content and delivery methods in teaching learners with autism? Addressing this question is essential because the design characteristics of professional learning provide early indicators of whether SB-PD can build practical classroom competence, thereby contributing localized insights to discussions on aligning teacher professional learning with inclusive education and autism-support needs in Tanzanian primary schools.

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The adoption of inclusive education in Tanzania frequently induces stress among educators, a challenge compounded by contextual factors such as an absence of institutional assistance. To address these pressures, the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014 (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2014) explicitly mandates the establishment of Teacher Resource Centers (TRCs) and professional development centers organized as school clusters to facilitate effective school-based in-service education and training (SB-INSET) and continuous professional development (CPD). However, available institutional records indicate that school clusters play little to no role in the CPD framework, while TRCs remain largely dysfunctional due to severe funding and resource deficits.

Furthermore, the alignment between Tanzania's administrative governance structures and the institutional organization of TRCs remains unclear regarding how to effectively address these systemic challenges. TRC coordinators are government-employed teachers, yet central and local government authorities frequently provide limited financial support for the designated function of offering professional assistance to teachers.

Nonetheless, responding to the difficulties teachers face in acquiring in-service competencies to support student learning, the Tanzanian government—through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) has implemented school-based professional development (SB-PD) as a supplement to traditional programs, anticipating that the SB-PD model will expand access to continuous training (MoEST, 2017). Various policy documents, including the National Framework for Continuing Professional Development for Practicing Teachers (MoEST, 2017), reflect Tanzania's formal adoption of the SB-PD model. These regulations require school management and officials to oversee SB-PD execution, asserting that school-embedded teacher learning effectively addresses the relevant needs of educators, students, and institutions (MoEST, 2017). Consequently, SB-PD is regarded as a cornerstone for enhancing teaching and learning quality.

Concurrently, educational research notes that educators frequently express concerns regarding the inclusion of students facing learning barriers, particularly those with learning impairments or dyslexia (Leseyane et al., 2018). As observed by Zwane and Malale (2018), these challenges

encompass difficulties in managing diverse student populations, insufficient training, hurdles in adapting customized curricula, financial constraints, inadequate administrative support, time limitations, knowledge gaps, and excessive workloads.

The actual school-level implementation of inclusive education amidst these experienced difficulties remains ambiguous. Additionally, research across Southern African contexts (Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022) indicates that teachers frequently encounter stress during inclusive education implementation, with unsupportive contextual variables from education departments exacerbating these pressures. Consequently, researchers advocate for classroom assistance, consistent and suitable teacher training programs, and comprehensive retraining to empower educators to execute inclusive practices. Given that the implementation of SB-PD to support teachers handling learners with autism in Tanzania remains severely limited, this study focuses on investigating the content and delivery of school-based continuous professional development initiatives dealing with learners with autism in Kongwa District public primary schools, centering specifically on teachers' and students' perceptions.

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 Structural Design and Contextual Dynamics of Effective School-Based Professional Development

Literature on teacher professional growth increasingly separates passive seminar attendance from professional learning that truly alters classroom methodologies. Successful school-based professional development (SB-PD) depends on essential structural components, specifically a strong content focus, active learning experiences, instructional coherence, adequate time allocation, and collective participation (Garet et al., 2001; Desimone, 2009). These design elements move the assessment of teacher training beyond basic attendance metrics toward purposeful learning structures.

Additionally, professional development does not happen in a vacuum; it arises from dynamic interactions linking individual educator beliefs, school organizational frameworks, and the specific attributes of the training activity (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Within under-resourced settings, real-world conditions such as scheduling pressures, administrative leadership, material availability, and local knowledge largely determine whether innovative teaching strategies successfully translate into everyday classroom practices.

This reality is clearly visible in Tanzania, where research highlights both the structural strengths and vulnerabilities of continuous teacher training. Intentional, school-embedded professional programs can notably improve instructional methods and cultivate favorable teacher attitudes toward interactive learning (Hardman et al., 2011). Conversely, conventional teacher training across Tanzania has historically suffered from fragmented, one-off seminars that lack continuous follow-up, collaborative problem-solving, rehearsal opportunities, and actionable feedback.

## 2.2 Content Specificity, Active Delivery, and Inclusive Pedagogy for Autism Spectrum Needs

Although broad pedagogical training provides a helpful starting point, effective inclusive education requires high content specificity tailored to unique learner requirements. For educators working with autistic students, general teaching strategies fall short without focused, autism-related knowledge directly tied to everyday classroom hurdles (Petersson-Bloom et al., 2023). High-impact in-service programs successfully blend didactic instruction with modeling, hands-on exercises, structured performance feedback, and on-site coaching to implement evidence-based approaches (Roberts & Simpson, 2016).

The need for context-specific, specialized training is further supported across developing educational contexts, where structured professional initiatives measurably improve teachers' subject understanding and their selection of evidence-based interventions (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Combining specialized content with collaborative, active delivery forms the foundation of impactful SB-PD. Nevertheless, a clear localized evidence gap persists regarding how school-based professional learning in Kongwa District puts these core elements into action. Assessing current local methods requires investigating training frequencies, content coverage, active instruction techniques, and formal school documentation to determine if institutional support for autism and inclusive education genuinely exists in practice.

## 2.3 Theoretical Literature Review

This investigation is theoretically anchored in Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Development, which argues that human cognition and advanced mental functions are fundamentally social and cultural rather than

isolated individual processes (Kozulin et al., 2003). According to Vygotsky, all higher-order cognitive capabilities first appear socially on an interpersonal plane before individuals internalize them on an intrapersonal level through social engagement. To thoroughly explain the origins and mechanics of cognitive development, this theoretical perspective utilizes four interconnected constructs: (1) the social origins of mental functions, emphasizing that consciousness is inherently social; (2) the unity of behavior and consciousness, viewing thought and action as a unified system; (3) mediation, which explains how psychological tools assist the shift from external social interaction to internal mental processing; and (4) psychological systems, which capture developmental advancement. In the context of SB-PD for teaching autistic learners, this theory illustrates how social exchanges shape educators' perspectives on inclusive practices. SB-PD functions as an instrument for mediated learning, supplying teachers with psychological tools (Kozulin, 2003) to adapt their instructional behaviors and successfully address diverse classroom needs.

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1 Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach. This approach is particularly appropriate when research aims to explore practice with a contextual understanding of how those practices are structured and institutionalized (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

## 3.2 Study Location, Population, and Sampling Strategy

The research was conducted across public primary schools in Kongwa District, located within the Dodoma Region of Tanzania. Participants included primary school teachers and key school-level informants (Heads of School and Ward Education Officers). Teachers were selected using sampling procedures to ensure objective representation, while purposive sampling was applied to select key informants based on their administrative and supervisory oversight of professional development activities.

## 3.3 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data collection relied on complementary qualitative primary instruments:

### 3.3.1 Interviews

Open-ended questions were used in a semi-structured interview schedule to guide participants in in-person discussions (Patton, 2015). This tool was used to collect data from Heads of School and Ward Education Officers (WEOs), offering an in-depth exploration of experiences and perceptions toward school-based teacher professional development (SB-PD). The interview guide helped maintain structural consistency. Interviews were conducted with Heads of School and Quality Assurers selected on the basis that these key informants, by virtue of their positions, provide rich insights regarding the modalities and governance of SB-PD in their respective schools.

### 3.3.2 Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were utilized as an ideal methodological choice to explore participants' perceptions of School-Based Professional Development (SB-PD) strategies used by teachers to support learners with autism during classroom instruction. FGDs provide a powerful tool for generating rich, contextualized, and in-depth qualitative data through interactive group dialogue. FGDs were conducted with teachers across the selected schools. This method is particularly justified as the topic involves shared perceptions and instructional experiences, benefiting from synergistic interaction where participants can build upon each other's responses, clarify meanings, and challenge or validate emerging themes, thereby yielding a deeper understanding than individual interviews alone (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, FGDs efficiently capture the collective voice of educators, revealing the range and consensus of their experiences regarding the effectiveness and impact of SB-PD-informed teaching strategies on classroom inclusion (Nyumba et al., 2018).

## 3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through six distinct phases established by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019): transcribing, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

## 3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to institutional research standards. Formal ethical approvals and clearance permits were secured from St. John’s University of Tanzania and the Kongwa District Authorities. Participation was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data

collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and respondents retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

# 4. Results and Discussion

## 4.1 Administrative support, resource management, and strategic direction of inclusive education and SB-PD

The following analysis synthesizes qualitative data gathered from interviews with the Heads of Schools (School A and School B) in Kongwa, Dodoma. The findings highlight the administrative perspective on the utility gap and the institutional challenges of managing inclusive education.

**Table 1: Teachers' Experiences and Support Systems**

| Theme | Key Administrative Findings | Frequency/Status |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher Support | Relies on informal "verbal encouragement"; no formal counseling or workload reduction. | Minimal |
| Primary Difficulties | 1. Lack of specialized resources; 2. Overcrowded classes; 3. Poor parental cooperation. | High Consensus |
| New Teacher Orientation | Ad-hoc mentorship by senior teachers; no formal induction modules for autism. | Informal |
| SB-PD Impact Metric | Primarily monitored through general lesson observations; no specific rubrics for autism. | Subjective |
| Strategy Preference | "Peer Coaching" identified as most effective, though workshops remain the most frequent. | Preference vs. Reality |
| Future Allocation | Plans to request more "capitation grants" for teaching aids; technology remains a low priority. | Resource-Dependent |

The administrative monitoring of teacher stress is largely reactive and informal. Both Heads of Schools admitted that while they recognize the burnout associated with managing autism in large classes (80+ students), there are no structural supports such as reduced workloads or counseling. Support for new teachers is delegated to senior peers through a traditional apprenticeship model rather than a structured orientation program.

This lack of formal support exacerbates the pedagogical drift noted in the teacher surveys. When administrators rely solely on verbal encouragement, teachers are likely to view autism support as an additional, uncompensated burden rather than a core professional duty. This confirms that the support vacuum identified in the document review is reinforced by an administrative culture that prioritizes school discipline over teacher emotional and technical well-being.

***SB-PD and Teacher Understanding***

The administrative rationale for SB-PD is driven by inclusive policy compliance rather than specific diagnostic data. Measuring the impact of SB-PD on teacher understanding remains a major administrative weakness; both respondents indicated that they watch how the teacher handles the class during general observations but do not use specific assessment tools to track the growth of autism-specific competencies. Furthermore, participation in SB-PD is not currently linked to any formal reward system or increased resource allocation for that specific teacher's classroom. Without specialized metrics to measure impact, the SB-PD sessions remain content-heavy but impact-light. The failure to link participation to rewards or resources explains why teachers (as seen in Table 5) feel only slight improvement—there is no institutional incentive to move beyond the minimum requirements of attendance. This creates a cycle of tokenistic participation where sessions are held to fulfill a calendar requirement rather than to solve pedagogical problems.

***SB-PD Strategies and Implementation***

Interestingly, while the document review showed a 92% reliance on workshops, both Heads of Schools identified peer coaching and demonstration lessons as the most effective ways to translate theory into practice. However, they cited time constraints and lack of expert facilitators as the reasons these models are not used more frequently. Regarding future planning, there is a heavy reliance on the central government's capitation grants, with little local strategic planning for low-cost, high-impact technology or sensory tools. There is a clear strategic disconnect between what administrators *know* is effective (peer coaching) and what they *actually* implement (workshops). This suggests that the functional dormancy of support teams is a result of administrative resignation to systemic constraints. Until school leaders shift from resource seekers to resource creators—leveraging existing personnel for peer coaching—the implementation of DIT and autism support will remain stalled despite the recognition of its importance.

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## 4.2 School-Based Professional Development (SB-PD) strategies used by teachers to support learners with autism

The following analysis captures the perspectives of students with autism from three schools in Kongwa. The groups included a mix of neurotypical students and those identified by teachers as having learning diversities or autism (S1–S20).

**Table 2: Summary of Student Focus Group Findings**

| Category | Key Student Observations | Representative Sentiment |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher Accessibility | Generally difficult to get individual help due to class size. | "Teachers are too busy with the whole class." |
| Material Usage | Heavy reliance on the chalkboard; minimal use of visual aids or "real objects." | "We mostly just copy notes from the board." |
| New Strategies (SB-PD) | Increase in group work (Think-Pair-Share), but lack of specialized tools. | "We sit in groups more now, but the work is the same." |
| Peer Support | High reliance on "high-achievers" to explain concepts to struggling peers. | "Students help us more than the teacher does." |
| Tool Usage | Near-total absence of timers, checklists, or sensory tools. | "I have never seen a timer used in class." |

***General Classroom Experiences and Accessibility***

Students report a significant help gap driven by high student-teacher ratios. While teachers are perceived as willing to help, the sheer volume of students makes individual attention rare. Most support is limited to basic repetitions or moving struggling students to the front row. Evidence below reveals this:

> *"It is hard to ask for help because the teacher is always rushing to finish the lesson before the bell rings." FGD with students from school A, February, 2026*

> *"Sometimes the teacher tells me to move to the front so I can see the board better, but they don't explain the words differently." FGD with students from school C, February, 2026*

> *"When I don't understand, I just wait for my friend to explain it to me later because the teacher has already moved to the next topic."FGD with students from school B, February, 2026*

The students' experience confirms that the syllabus pressure noted by teachers translates into a lack of Instructional Scaffolding for learners. Moving a student closer to the board is a physical accommodation, but it does not address the cognitive or sensory needs of a learner with autism. This suggests that SB-PD has not yet successfully shifted teacher practice toward Content Differentiation.

***Perceptions On Specific Support Strategies (SB-PD Impact)***

Students have noticed a shift toward Collaborative Learning (group work), which aligns with the SB-PD focus

on learner-centered methodologies. However, there is a total absence of specialized autism-support tools like visual timers or checklists. Peer-to-peer support is the primary engine of inclusion, though it is often unmanaged by the teacher. This is revealed by the evidence captured below:

> *"The teacher now puts us in groups of five. It is better because S5 (a student with difficulties) can ask us questions without being shy" FGD with students from school C, February, 2026*

> *"I like the groups, but sometimes it is too noisy and I can't think. I wish there was a quiet place to sit." FGD with students from school A, February, 2026*

> *"The teacher says, 'S1, show S18 how to do this,' and then the teacher goes to sit at the desk. I feel like I am bothering my friend" FGD with students from school B, February, 2026*

> *"We don't have timers or pictures. The teacher just tells us 'Hurry up!' or 'Keep quiet!' but doesn't show us how much time is left. FGD with students from school A, February, 2026*

The shift to group work is a positive sign of SB-PD impact, but the support vacuum" regarding sensory management (noise) and visual tools remains. The reliance on peers as mini-teachers without formal structure can lead to frustration for both the helper and the learner, suggesting that SB-PD needs to move from general grouping to structured peer-mediated intervention.

***Impact and Suggestions for Improvement***

Students are highly observant of fairness. They recognize that while some students get extra attention, the teacher rarely explains *why*, leading to minor complaints about favoritism. Their suggestions focus heavily on Visual and Multimodal learning (see the evidence below):

> *"The best thing the teacher does is when they use a story or act out a play. It makes everyone understand, not just the smart ones." FGD with students from school C, February, 2026*

> *"Sometimes the teacher gives one student less work to do. Others complain that it isn't fair because they have to do ten questions while he does three." FGD with students from school B, February, 2026*

> *"If the teacher used more pictures or brought real things to touch, the class would be better for everyone. We get tired of just looking at the chalkboard FGD with students from school A, February, 2026*

The fairness concern (S15) indicates that teachers are not effectively communicating the rationale behind Differentiated Assessment. Furthermore, the students' desire for real things to touch (S20) reinforces the need for Environment and Material Differentiation. This confirms that the most impactful strategy perceived by students is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), even if they do not know the term they want lessons that are inherently accessible to everyone.

The findings from the student focus groups in Kongwa highlight a significant pedagogical surface-leveling, where students recognize a shift toward collaborative grouping but report a total absence of specialized, individual-level support tools. This finding is critically similar to the research of Singal (2019), who argued that in many Global South contexts, inclusive changes are often restricted to physical presence and general grouping rather than the deep instructional differentiation required for neurodivergent learners. Singal (2019) notes that without specialized tools like visual schedules or timers—which 0% of Kongwa students observed—inclusion remains a social rather than an academic success. The students' reliance on peer support (S2, S18) mirrors the proxy teaching phenomenon identified by Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018), where teachers in overcrowded classrooms unintentionally delegate their instructional role to high-achieving students, potentially leading to the help gap and feelings of being a bother (S18).

Critically, the students' suggestions for real things to touch and acting out plays (S4, S20) align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), yet contrast sharply with the actual classroom reality of copying notes from the board. This mismatch reflects what Schuelka (2018) terms bureaucratic inclusion, where the school fulfills the policy of having diverse students in one room but fails to provide the multimodal representation necessary for students with autism to thrive. Furthermore, the complaints of unfairness regarding differentiated tasks (S15) suggest a failure in inclusive transparency. Unlike the findings of Messiou (2017), who demonstrated that involving students in conversations about why certain classmates receive different support leads to higher social cohesion, Kongwa teachers appear to implement differentiation in a vacuum,

leading to peer resentment. This confirms that school-based professional development must move beyond teaching methods to teaching classroom culture management to ensure that differentiation is understood by all students as a tool for equity rather than favoritism.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

## 5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated administrative support, resource management, and the strategic direction of inclusive education and School-Based Professional Development (SB-PD) across secondary schools in Kongwa District. The findings reveal a critical leadership-execution gap: while administrators recognize the heavy emotional and cognitive burden placed on teachers managing inclusive classrooms and autism-related needs, their support systems remain largely reactive, informal, and reliant on verbal encouragement rather than structural interventions like reduced workloads or formal counseling.

Furthermore, administrative monitoring of SB-PD impact is predominantly subjective, relying on general lesson observations rather than specific competencies or rubrics. This has fostered a cycle of tokenistic participation where sessions fulfill calendar requirements rather than solve pedagogical challenges. Although administrators acknowledge that peer coaching is the most effective SB-PD strategy, systemic constraints, time limitations, and a reliance on external capitation grants perpetuate a strategic disconnect resulting in the continuous implementation of traditional, content-heavy workshops.

From the student perspective, while learners perceive an increase in collaborative group work, they report a significant help gap caused by high student-teacher ratios and an absence of specialized autism-support tools, such as visual timers, checklists, or sensory aids. Instruction remains heavily anchored to chalkboard notes, forcing an over-reliance on unmanaged peer support where high-achieving students act as proxy teachers. Finally, a lack of transparency regarding differentiated tasks has created student perceptions of favoritism, highlighting that inclusion in Kongwa is currently operating as a form of bureaucratic inclusion haracterized by physical presence and general grouping rather than deep instructional differentiation or Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. School leaders and district education authorities must move beyond informal verbal encouragement by establishing structured induction modules and formal mentorship or peer-coaching programs specifically addressing neurodevelopmental disorders like autism. Administrators should also explore institutional mechanisms to manage teacher burnout and mitigate the stress of overcrowded classrooms.
2. School administrators must transition from traditional, content-heavy workshops to collaborative strategies like peer coaching and demonstration lessons. Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation frameworks for SB-PD should incorporate specific competency rubrics to track the direct impact of training on classroom practice, linking participation to institutional incentives or resource allocation.
3. Rather than relying exclusively on central government capitation grants, school management should foster local capacity-building by creating low-cost, high-impact sensory tools, visual timers, and schedules. Teachers must also be trained in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and multimodal representation to minimize chalk-and-talk dependency.
4. Teachers must be equipped through targeted SB-PD to manage classroom culture and student perceptions of fairness effectively. By openly communicating the rationale behind differentiated instruction and structured peer-mediated interventions, educators can cultivate peer empathy, eliminate feelings of favoritism, and ensure that inclusion translates into both academic and social equity.

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