

Voices from the Classroom: Lived Experiences of Teachers Supporting Students with Special Needs

TERESA R. MALABUYOC
QUEENE Q. LARIBA
CRISTY D. SARVIDA
CONRADO D. AYUBAN JR.

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The authors are all affiliated with Northwest Samar State University, Calbayog City, pursuing a Master of Arts in Education, majoring in Administration and Supervision and Curriculum and Instruction.

malabuyocteresa@gmail.com
queenelariba2@gmail.com
cristy.duhilag061@deped.gov.ph
conrado.ayuban@deped.gov.ph

Abstract— The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted support systems for students with disabilities and intensified existing inequities in Philippine elementary schools. As inclusive education gains prominence under Republic Act No. 11650, teachers' readiness to implement adaptive practices during post-pandemic transitions remains underexplored. This study, "Voices from the Classroom: Lived Experiences of Teachers Supporting Students with Special Needs," examines how elementary educators in the San Juan District, Southern Leyte, construct meaning around inclusive pedagogy amid evolving policy mandates and local constraints.

Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis within a Social Constructivist framework, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with five purposively sampled teachers in School Year 2024–2025—complementary document analysis of lesson plans and school support logs enriched contextual understanding. Transcripts were coded thematically, and trustworthiness was established via member checks and peer debriefing.

Six interrelated themes emerged: (1) Challenge–Reward Duality—teachers experienced both strain and satisfaction in supporting diverse learners; (2) Multisensory & Differentiated Strategies—use of tactile materials, visual aids, and scaffolded tasks; (3) Training & Material Gaps—a critical need for targeted professional development and adaptive resources; (4) Pandemic Driven Adaptations—innovations such as home visitations, flexible scheduling, and hybrid communication; (5) Collaborative Networks—partnerships with parents, specialists, and peers as pivotal support; and (6) Systemic Recommendations—calls for sequenced training modules, resource sharing frameworks, and enhanced policy enforcement.

Teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency, yet systemic administrative backing and resource allocation gaps hinder sustainable inclusion. With UNESCO's inclusive education pillars and Vygotsky's emphasis on social scaffolding, findings suggest that embedding continuous coaching cycles, establishing a district-level resource center, and formalizing parent-teacher collaboration protocols are imperative. Future research should evaluate the impact of these interventions on student learning and well-being.

Keywords — Inclusive Education; Lived Experiences; Elementary Teachers; Special Needs; Phenomenological Analysis, Teacher Preparedness, Post-Pandemic, Emotional Resilience, Support Mechanisms, Systemic Support, Instructional Strategies, Professional Development

I. Introduction

Inclusive education represents a paradigm shift in global schooling, asserting that every child—regardless of ability, background, or context—has a fundamental right to participate fully in mainstream classrooms (UNESCO, 2017). This principle is echoed in Philippine legislation through Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) and DepEd Order No. 74 (2017), which mandate comprehensive support mechanisms for learners with special needs. However, policy enactment alone does not guarantee classroom transformation. The abrupt transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed critical vulnerabilities within local education systems, magnifying pre-existing resource disparities and challenging teachers' capacity to deliver inclusive instruction under constrained conditions.

In Southern Leyte's San Juan District, elementary teachers have navigated shifting mandates, fluctuating modalities, and limited infrastructural support, yet their lived experiences remain underdocumented in scholarly discourse. By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within a Social Constructivist framework, this study foregrounds teacher voices to illuminate how practitioners interpret, enact, and sustain inclusive pedagogies amid systemic constraints.

This research advances the field by:

1. **Contextualizing Policy and Practice:** Evaluating the translation of national inclusion policies into everyday classroom realities.
2. **Amplifying Practitioner Expertise:** Highlighting teachers' adaptive strategies and professional judgment as critical assets for inclusive learning environments.
3. **Informing Systemic Interventions:** Generating evidence-based recommendations to strengthen professional development, resource infrastructure, and collaborative processes.

This study centers on teacher perspectives and addresses a significant Philippine inclusive education research gap. It offers transferable insights for policymakers, administrators, and educators committed to equity and excellence in mainstream settings.

Literature Review

Global and Regional Trends Research on inclusive practices worldwide highlights the efficacy of collaborative instructional models. In Australia, co-teaching frameworks have been shown to enhance learning outcomes for students with disabilities by fostering shared

responsibility and leveraging specialist knowledge (Florian & Spratt, 2018). Similarly, peer-mediated interventions in Canada illustrate the value of structured peer tutoring in promoting academic engagement and social integration (Black, Weintraub, & Walmsley, 2020). Southeast Asian contexts reveal parallel challenges: Rahman and Yusof (2020) report that pandemic-related school closures disproportionately affected learners with special needs in Malaysia, while the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2021) notes that abrupt shifts to remote learning accentuated infrastructural inequities across the region.

Philippine Context DepEd Order No. 74 (2017) and subsequent policy instruments affirm the state's commitment to inclusive basic education. However, empirical studies indicate persistent implementation gaps. Reyes (2019) found that Metro Manila teachers possess positive attitudes toward inclusion yet struggle with limited access to specialized materials and unsystematic professional development. In Cebu, Cruz (2020) underscores the absence of centralized resource hubs, forcing teachers to develop adaptive materials independently, often at the cost of instructional time. Santos (2021) further documents that, in Southern Leyte, pandemic disruptions curtailed hands-on support and highlighted the variability of administrative backing and community engagement.

Theoretical Underpinnings Extant literature converges on two complementary frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The ecological perspective situates teacher experiences within nested systems, emphasizing how policy-level directives (macrosystem) and institutional supports (exosystem) shape classroom practices (microsystem). UDL principles advocate for curriculum flexibility through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2018), providing a structured lens for analyzing differentiated instructional strategies reported by teachers.

II. Methodology

This section outlines the study's methodological foundation, detailing the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, ethical safeguards, and analytical approach. By employing a descriptive phenomenological lens through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research aims to illuminate teachers' lived experiences in inclusive education settings. The methodological choices were intentionally aligned with the study's goal of capturing rich, meaningful insights while ensuring rigor, credibility, and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

Research Design: This study employs a descriptive phenomenological design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to capture teachers' nuanced, subjective experiences navigating inclusive education. IPA was selected for its rigor in elucidating how participants make sense of complex phenomena (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Sample of the Study: Five public elementary teachers in San Juan District were purposively selected based on (a) a minimum of two years of inclusive teaching experience and (b) engagement with students identified under DepEd's Special Education (SPED) program in SY 2024–2025. Participant demographics (e.g., years of service, specializations) were documented to provide contextual depth and support transferability of findings.

Procedures: Data triangulation was achieved through (1) semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face (30–45 minutes each), guided by an interview protocol validated by special education experts; (2) document analysis of lesson plans, support logs, and individualized education plans to corroborate interview insights; and (3) reflective field notes capturing observational and contextual details. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Processing: Following Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method, transcripts were systematically coded to identify significant statements, formulate meanings, and cluster themes. An iterative process of theme refinement involved constant comparison and consensus-building among researchers. The final thematic structure was validated through participant feedback, ensuring the authenticity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations: Credibility was ensured via member checks, allowing participants to verify transcript accuracy and interpretative summaries. Peer debriefing sessions with three SPED specialists provided external auditing, while an audit trail documented decision-making processes throughout data analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from Northwest Samar State University's Institutional Review Board, and participants received assurances of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time.

III. Results and Discussion

This section presents the study's core findings and interprets them in light of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, six emergent themes capture the nuanced experiences of teachers navigating inclusive education in post-pandemic contexts. Each theme concerns existing studies, highlighting alignment with and divergence from current educational discourse. Integrating empirical insights and theoretical perspectives provides a deeper understanding of the systemic and personal dynamics shaping inclusive teaching practices in the Philippine elementary school setting.

Theme 1: Challenge–Reward Duality

Findings: Teachers described the tension between the high demands of inclusive instruction—especially in the absence of specialized training—and the deep sense of professional fulfillment when students with special needs made progress.

Discussion & Implications: This duality aligns with Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, and Shamberger's (2016) finding that co-teaching can be taxing and gratifying when collaboration yields positive student outcomes. The emotional investment teachers report reflects Pérez and Manoli's (2021) emphasis on educator commitment as a driver of inclusive school cultures. However, the strain teachers experience without structured support may undermine long-term retention and well-being (Santos, 2021).

Theme 2: Multisensory and Differentiated Strategies

Findings: Participants routinely employed tactile materials, visual schedules, scaffolded tasks, and low-tech assistive devices to address diverse learner profiles.

Discussion & Implications: These practices exemplify Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2018), which advocate multiple means of representation and engagement. Florian and Spratt (2018) similarly documented how such strategies enhance access in co-taught classrooms. However, our data suggest that when teachers lack formal training in UDL, adaptations are ad hoc rather than systematic—underscoring the need for sequenced professional development (Reyes, 2019).

Theme 3: Training and Material Gaps

Findings: Teachers reported insufficient sequenced professional development on disability-specific strategies and the labor-intensive nature of creating adaptive materials from scratch.

Discussion & Implications: This echoes Cruz's (2020) identification of resource shortages in Cebu and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education's (2021) report on regional PD deficits. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model suggests that exosystem supports (e.g., district-level training programs) critically shape classroom microsystems. Without these, individual teacher agency compensates for systemic voids—an unsustainable model that risks burnout (Rahman & Yusof, 2020).

Theme 4: Pandemic-Driven Adaptations

Findings: In response to COVID-19 disruptions, teachers innovated through home visitations, flexible scheduling, hybrid communication platforms, and repurposed technologies (e.g., SMS-based assignments).

Discussion & Implications: These adaptive responses mirror Santos's (2021) observations in Southern Leyte and global shifts toward remote inclusion (Black et al., 2020). However, relying on personal initiative rather than institutional contingency planning highlights a macrosystem vulnerability: the absence of formal pandemic-responsive inclusion policies (UNESCO, 2017). Institutionalizing these emergent strategies could build resilience for future crises.

Theme 5: Collaborative Networks

Findings: Partnerships with parents, special educators, peers, and community agencies were pivotal, though access and quality of collaboration varied widely across schools.

Discussion & Implications: Vygotsky's (Morin & Friesen, 2017) social constructivist lens underscores the importance of scaffolding through social networks. Friend et al. (2016) similarly emphasize collaboration as essential for inclusive outcomes. Variation in network strength points to inequities in exosystem supports—reinforcing calls for formalized parent-teacher protocols and cross-disciplinary PLCs to ensure consistency (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Theme 6: Systemic Recommendations

Findings: Teachers advocated for continuous coaching cycles, district resource centers for adaptive materials, formal parent-teacher collaboration protocols, and dedicated collaborative planning time.

Discussion & Implications: These recommendations align with Ainscow, Dyson, and Weiner's (2016) guidance on embedding inclusion into systemic policy and practice. Establishing local resource hubs can bridge macrosystem intentions (RA 11650; DepEd Order No. 74) with classroom realities. Training internal "train-the-trainer" cohorts would leverage existing teacher agencies to sustain professional growth (Pérez & Manoli, 2021).

IV. Conclusion

This study offers a nuanced understanding of how individual teacher agency and systemic support structures intersect to shape inclusive education practices in Southern Leyte's elementary schools in the post-pandemic era. The findings underscore that, although teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience—innovating multisensory strategies and adapting rapidly to remote and blended learning environments—the absence of comprehensive, sustained supports at higher administrative levels constrains the scalability and durability of these efforts. In the context of international standards, this conclusion distills the implications of each core finding and points toward strategic pathways for policy, practice, and future inquiry.

Key Conclusions:

1. Balancing Teacher Agency and Systemic Support

While educators' creative problem-solving and intrinsic motivation have filled critical service gaps, these individual efforts are neither uniform nor sufficient to guarantee equitable inclusion across diverse school contexts. For genuine, long-term transformation, district and national authorities must embed structured support mechanisms—such as clear implementation

guidelines, dedicated funding streams, and accountability frameworks—to reinforce and amplify teacher-led innovations.

2. Elevating Professional Development

The research confirms that one-off workshops or generic training sessions fail to equip teachers with the specialized competencies required for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and social-constructivist methodologies. Instead, a sequenced professional development continuum—beginning with foundational disability awareness, advancing to hands-on application of differentiated instructional techniques, and sustained through in-class coaching and peer mentoring—is essential. Such an approach will bridge the theory-practice divide and cultivate a community of practice that systematically embeds inclusive pedagogies.

3. Strengthening Collaborative Networks

Informal and ad-hoc parent-teacher interactions have yielded localized successes, yet collaboration remains uneven and reactive without formalized protocols and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Institutionalizing regular, structured forums for stakeholder engagement will not only distribute the cognitive and logistical load more equitably but also foster shared ownership of inclusion goals. Standardized collaboration templates and clear role descriptions can ensure that every school benefits from a robust scaffolding network.

4. Establishing Resource Hubs

The sporadic availability of adaptive materials and assistive technologies emerged as a significant impediment to inclusive practice. A centralized district-level resource hub—equipped with a lending library of manipulatives, low-tech and high-tech assistive tools, and multimedia teaching modules—can operationalize inclusion mandates and liberate teachers from the burdensome task of individual resource creation. Moreover, such hubs can serve as focal points for innovation, research partnerships, and ongoing evaluation of material efficacy.

Implications and Future Research

- **Impact Evaluation:** Rigorous, large-scale quantitative studies should measure the academic achievement, social participation, and emotional well-being of students following the rollout of structured professional development, collaborative protocols, and resource hubs. This evidence will guide the iterative refinement of interventions and inform cost-benefit analyses.
- **Longitudinal Inquiry:** Establishing multi-year cohort studies will enable scholars to trace trajectories of teacher retention, professional self-efficacy, and burnout about evolving support infrastructures. Such longitudinal data are crucial to understanding the sustainability of policy reforms.

- **Comparative Policy Analysis:** Cross-regional research comparing policy enactment, funding allocation, and implementation fidelity can identify best practices and system-level levers that accelerate inclusive education. This macro-level perspective will help align local initiatives with national and international benchmarks.
- **Digital Inclusion Platforms:** Future investigations should explore the design, adoption, and efficacy of digital platforms—such as virtual PLCs, open-access repositories of UDL materials, and real-time assistive communication apps—to sustain inclusive practices beyond crisis-driven contexts and bridge geographic disparities.

By integrating these recommendations into a coherent, multi-stakeholder strategy, educational leaders in Southern Leyte—and similarly situated regions—can transform isolated pockets of innovation into a thriving, system-wide ecosystem of inclusive excellence.

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