

Navigating Inclusive Classrooms: A Phenomenological Study

Jinky H. Ledesma¹, Joel M Durban²

Guimaras State University, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers managing inclusive classrooms, focusing on how they support learners with diverse needs. Using a qualitative phenomenological design guided by Colaizzi's framework, in-depth interviews were conducted with three experienced teachers. Analysis identified eight themes: professional transitions, managing classroom diversity, differentiated instruction, systemic challenges, professional growth, emotional commitment, resilience, and career stability, organized into four dimensions: professional, instructional, emotional, and institutional. Findings show that teachers continuously adapt instruction, develop resilience, and refine professional skills while navigating diverse learner needs and systemic constraints. Effective inclusive education emerges from the combined influence of professional development, instructional flexibility, emotional dedication, and institutional support. The study highlights the importance of teacher training, ongoing professional learning, and supportive school structures to sustain inclusive practices in public elementary schools.

Keywords: inclusive education, phenomenology, differentiated instruction, teacher resilience, inclusive classrooms

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education ensures equitable access to quality learning for all students, regardless of ability, disability, or socio-cultural background, fostering inclusion, respect, and belonging (UNESCO, 2020). Teachers are central to implementing inclusive practices that address diverse academic, social, and emotional needs. While rewarding, inclusive teaching poses challenges, including limited resources, insufficient training, and variable administrative support (Ainscow, 2022). Teachers' experiences are influenced by professional preparation, access to instructional tools, institutional support, and personal attitudes toward inclusion (Forlin, 2010). Strategies such as differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and ongoing professional development are essential for meeting diverse learner needs (Loreman, 2017; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 11650 mandates inclusive education and support services for learners with disabilities (Republic of the Philippines, 2022). Despite policy frameworks, teachers still face challenges related to classroom diversity and resources. This study explores the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers navigating inclusive classrooms during the 2025–2026 school year to inform effective support strategies.

Statement of Objectives: This study sought to: (1) Describe the lived experiences of teachers handling inclusive classrooms; and (2) Identify the essence of these experiences.

Epistemological Perspective

This study employs Husserl's phenomenology and Colaizzi's descriptive method to explore teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms. Husserl's phenomenology focuses on understanding lived experiences by uncovering the essence of a phenomenon through conscious perception, emphasizing intentionality and bracketing preconceived notions (Husserl, 2021). Colaizzi's method complements this by providing a systematic approach to analysis, including extracting significant statements, deriving meanings, grouping themes, and validating findings with participants, ensuring authenticity and credibility (Colaizzi, 1978; Neubauer et al., 2022).

The study is further guided by inclusive education theory, which asserts that all students have the right to participate fully in mainstream settings. Drawing on the social model of disability, this approach highlights systemic barriers as key obstacles to inclusion and positions teachers as essential in adapting instruction and classroom practices to meet the needs of diverse learners (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study examined the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in Iloilo City teaching inclusive classrooms during the 2025–2026 school year. It focused on how teachers perceive and interpret their daily experiences with learners with special educational needs alongside general education students. Participants had at least 1 year of inclusive teaching experience and were actively teaching at the time; those with less experience or who were no longer in full-time teaching were excluded. The study was limited to elementary inclusive classrooms and did not include secondary, private, or special education-only settings. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews that captured participants' narratives. While findings are context-specific and may include subjective bias, they offer valuable insights to inform policy, teacher support, and future research in inclusive education.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Inclusive education is a rights-based approach that ensures all learners, including those with disabilities, can participate in mainstream classrooms. It emphasizes removing systemic barriers, adapting teaching practices, and fostering a school culture that views diversity as a resource rather than a challenge (UNESCO, 2023; Ainscow, 2020). In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 11650 mandates support services, accommodations, and accessible learning materials to facilitate inclusion.

Successful inclusive pedagogy relies on flexible teaching methods and high expectations for all students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2024). Teachers play a central role, with self-efficacy and positive attitudes significantly influencing implementation. Educators who are confident in their skills are better able to adapt instruction and support diverse learners, while favorable attitudes increase their commitment to inclusion. However, factors such as training, workload, resources, and institutional support shape these capabilities (Sharma & Sokal, 2023; OECD, 2020).

Professional development and collaboration enhance teacher effectiveness, confidence, and growth. Strategies such as co-teaching, mentoring, and continuous training promote inclusive practices, although limited time and heavy workloads may hinder collaboration (Friend et al., 2020; Murawski, 2018). Supportive leadership and school culture further enable successful inclusion (Ainscow, 2020).

Research shows inclusive education improves learners' academic engagement, social interactions, and sense of belonging (Kozleski, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). Teachers with strong training, institutional support, and professional networks are more likely to implement inclusive strategies effectively. Conversely, limited support can lead to stress, resistance, and burnout (Sharma & Sokal, 2023; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020).

Local studies in the Philippines reveal similar patterns: teachers demonstrate commitment and adaptability but face challenges such as large class sizes, insufficient training, and limited resources (Domingo, 2021; Santos, 2020). While inclusive teaching fosters professional growth and empathy, stress and burnout remain risks without adequate support (Reyes, 2022; Mendoza, 2022). Strong leadership, collaboration, and resource availability improve teacher confidence and effectiveness (Garcia, 2023; Lopez, 2023).

Overall, literature highlights that inclusive education benefits learners but requires systemic support, teacher preparation, and collaborative school environments. Despite extensive research on teacher readiness and perceptions, few studies have explored the lived experiences of public elementary teachers in Iloilo City, creating a need for the present study to provide context-specific insights for policy and practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design This study used a descriptive-qualitative phenomenological approach to explore teachers' lived experiences in inclusive classrooms. In-depth interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's method to identify significant statements, derive meanings, and cluster themes. Researchers practiced epoché, or bracketing, to set aside assumptions, and member checking ensured credibility. Once the data were analyzed, the researchers returned to the informants to validate whether the analysis aligned with the essence of what the informants wanted to convey. This approach provided an authentic understanding of teachers' perspectives, challenges, and strategies in managing diverse learners, highlighting the essence of their experiences in implementing inclusive education.

Informants of the Study The study involved public elementary teachers in Iloilo City who teach inclusive classrooms during 2025–2026, focusing on their experiences managing diverse learners and their instructional practices. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, and data collection continued until saturation to capture comprehensive insights into teachers' challenges, strategies, and professional experiences.

Data Gathering Instrument The primary tool was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, designed to explore teachers' lived experiences in inclusive classrooms. Questions were open-ended and focused on classroom management, instructional practices, daily experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and professional growth. In-depth face-to-face interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes capturing non-verbal cues, emotional responses, and contextual details. Audio recordings ensured accurate transcription, while field notes and bracketing enhanced interpretation. All data were kept confidential and securely stored.

Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument

The interview guide was validated by a panel of five experts, who assessed its clarity, coherence, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. Feedback was incorporated to ensure the instrument effectively captured teachers' lived experiences in inclusive classrooms.

In qualitative research, reliability is ensured through trustworthiness, which encompasses credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Data Gathering Procedure

Upon approval of the research title, the researcher obtained approval from the Schools Division Superintendent and the school principals before conducting a pilot interview and the main study. Data were gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with teachers in inclusive classrooms, using bracketing to set aside personal biases and focus on participants' experiences. Participants received a formal letter and consent form, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. Interviews encouraged open reflection on classroom management, instructional strategies, challenges, and professional growth, and lasted at participants' convenience. Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Colaizzi's method. Meaning units were identified and grouped, and thematic analysis revealed recurring patterns and insights into teachers' experiences in inclusive education.

Data Analysis

This study used Colaizzi's seven-step method to analyze teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms. Interviews were carefully read to identify key statements reflecting challenges, strategies, and rewards. Meanings were interpreted and grouped into themes such as differentiated instruction, the need for support, and the rewards of inclusive teaching. A detailed narrative was developed to describe the phenomenon, and member checking was conducted to ensure accuracy and validity. The final analysis synthesized findings into a holistic view of teachers' lived experiences, highlighting both challenges and professional growth in inclusive education.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis revealed eight key themes capturing teachers’ experiences in inclusive education: (1) navigating professional transitions, (2) managing classroom diversity, (3) implementing differentiated and individualized instruction, (4) confronting systemic challenges in public education, (5) professional growth through experience, (6) emotional commitment and sense of calling, (7) emotional vulnerability and resilience, and (8) stability and career security.

Table 1: Formulated Meaning to Theme Clusters to Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Began career providing individualized therapeutic support before transitioning into classroom teaching	Transition from therapy to classroom teaching	Navigating Professional Transitions
Early teaching experience focused on specialized support services for learners with special needs	Transition from therapy to classroom teaching	Navigating Professional Transitions
Served in a pioneering role in a newly established program	Early Professional Leadership Experience	Navigating Professional Transitions
Accepted leadership responsibility as a pioneer teacher	Early Professional Leadership Experience	Navigating Professional Transitions
Managed diverse learners within one classroom setting	Transition to Inclusive Teaching	Navigating Professional Transitions
Inclusive classroom composed of learners with varied abilities	Transition to Inclusive Teaching	Navigating Professional Transitions
Resistance to individualized and specialized classroom teaching	Initial reluctance and adjustment struggles	Navigating Professional Transitions
Reluctance and discomfort regarding new role demand	Initial reluctance and adjustment struggles	Navigating Professional Transitions
Early-career status adjustment to new responsibilities	Initial reluctance and adjustment struggles	Navigating Professional Transitions
Initial difficulty and gradual adjustment to classroom teaching	Initial reluctance and adjustment struggles	Navigating Professional Transitions
Previous private school setting had a highly specialized student population	Moving from private to public school context	Navigating Professional Transitions
Long-term experience contributed to professional competence in inclusive education	Adapting to increased caseloads and system differences	Navigating Professional Transitions
Public school context involved larger class sizes and limited resources	Adapting to increased caseloads and system differences	Navigating Professional Transitions
Sustained involvement in inclusive teaching from the start of career	Adapting to increased caseloads and system differences	Navigating Professional Transitions

Theme 1: Navigating Professional Transitions

The theme describes how teachers adjusted from specialized roles to inclusive classrooms, requiring changes in instructional strategies, classroom management, and professional identity. Early experience in special education, particularly through individualized instruction, shaped teachers’ understanding of learner diversity and supported the development of competence, confidence, and differentiation skills (Florian & Camedda, 2020; Sharma & Sokal, 2022).

However, transitioning to inclusive settings posed challenges, especially in shifting from one-on-one instruction to managing diverse groups. This required flexibility, ongoing preparation, and adaptive teaching strategies, reinforcing the need for differentiated instruction and effective classroom management (Tomlinson, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). The transition thus functions as a developmental process that strengthens pedagogical competence.

Institutional context also influenced this process. Differences in class size and resources between private and public schools affected the implementation of inclusive practices, with larger classes and limited resources creating additional challenges (Ainscow, 2020; OECD, 2021). This indicates that professional transitions are shaped by both individual capabilities and structural conditions.

Over time, accumulated experience enhanced teachers' confidence and refined their instructional strategies, supporting more effective inclusive practices (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Florian, 2021).

Table 2: Formulated Meaning to Theme Clusters to Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Inclusive classroom consisted of learners with diverse disabilities alongside typically developing students	Handling mixed groups of learners	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Teacher preparation included experience teaching heterogeneous groups of learners with disabilities	Handling mixed groups of learners	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Private school setting served predominantly students with special needs with limited inclusion of regular learners	Handling mixed groups of learners	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Instruction was differentiated according to learners' individual abilities and needs	Differentiated instruction	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Teacher gained experience supporting multiple disability categories within one educational context	Differentiated instruction	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Initial implementation of inclusive classroom practices involved disorder and adjustment challenges	Establishing routines to manage chaos	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Establishing consistent routines helped reduce behavioral disruptions	Establishing routines to manage chaos	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Behavioral issues were identified as the primary difficulty in managing inclusion	Addressing behavioral challenges	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Severe behavioral episodes interfered with effective instruction and classroom control	Addressing behavioral challenges	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Teaching learners requiring intensive support increased instructional complexity	Addressing behavioral challenges	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Managing individual behavioral crises in group settings created difficulty in	Addressing behavioral challenges	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms

attending to all learners simultaneously		
Smaller class sizes in private schools made classroom management easier	Structural factors affecting inclusion	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Adequate resources and lower student-teacher ratios improved classroom manageability	Structural factors affecting inclusion	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Support personnel facilitated the management of learners with disabilities	Collaborative support systems	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Support staff helped regulate behavioral disruptions during crises	Collaborative support systems	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms
Collaborative support systems enhanced effective implementation of inclusion	Collaborative support systems	Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms

Theme 2: Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms

Managing Diversity in Inclusive Classrooms describes teachers’ experiences with learners who have varied abilities, needs, and behaviors in inclusive settings. These classrooms include students with diverse disabilities and developmental levels, requiring teachers to adapt instruction, manage behavior, and collaborate with support personnel. Managing diversity is both complex and meaningful, strengthening teachers’ competence and commitment to inclusion.

Teachers reported working with mixed-ability groups and modifying lesson plans, simplifying content, and varying activities to match learners’ readiness. These practices align with the principles of inclusive education, including equity and participation, and reflect differentiated instruction that supports access for all learners (UNESCO, 2020; Florian, 2021; Ainscow, 2020; Tomlinson, 2021; Sharma & Sokal, 2022).

Challenges included managing tantrums and emotional difficulties, underscoring the need for patience and positive behavior support to maintain inclusive environments (Emmers et al., 2020; Sugai & Simonsen, 2021). Teachers also struggled to balance individualized attention with whole-class management, a task that required flexibility and effective strategies (Friend & Cook, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Support from shadow teachers, colleagues, and institutions further enabled teachers to effectively manage diverse learners, underscoring the importance of collaboration in inclusive education (Friend & Cook, 2020; Florian & Camedda, 2020).

Table 3: Connecting Formulated Meaning to Theme Clusters and Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Instruction was adjusted according to individual learner abilities	Modifying lessons based on learner needs	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Teacher monitored learner responses to assess understanding	Modifying lessons based on learner needs	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Teacher sought professional knowledge to support diverse learners	Support for teachers	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Alternative communication strategies supported non-verbal learners	Accommodations and support for learners with disabilities	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Visual supports and routines facilitated learning	Accommodations and support for learners with disabilities	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Instruction considered emotional and behavioral needs	Accommodations and support for learners with disabilities	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction

Instruction was guided by individualized planning	Personalized instructional planning	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Learners received individualized support and pacing	Personalized instructional planning	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Lesson plans were designed for inclusive practices	Inclusive participation strategies	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Instruction targeted specific learning deficits	Addressing foundational skill deficits	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Teacher developed competence in differentiated teaching	Teacher professional growth	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Adjustments enabled learners to access instruction	Teacher professional growth	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Assessment guided instructional planning	Data-driven instruction	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Structured IEP goals	Structured goal setting	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Structured instructional supports enhanced engagement	Structured goal setting	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction
Instruction was aligned with IEP targets and outcomes	Accountability for learner progress	Differentiated and Individualized Instruction

Theme 3: Differentiated and Individualized Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms

Differentiated and Individualized Instruction reflects teachers’ experiences adapting instruction to meet the diverse needs, abilities, and learning paces of learners in inclusive classrooms. Teachers employ flexible strategies, individualized learning plans, assessment-based instruction, and varied materials to support meaningful learning, making differentiation and individualization essential for addressing learner diversity.

Teachers modify lessons and activities based on learners’ readiness and characteristics, ensuring accessibility and engagement. Participants emphasized flexibility, with instruction adjusted to learner needs and abilities. This aligns with the principles of differentiated instruction principles that promote participation and responsiveness to learner diversity (Tomlinson, 2021; Florian, 2021).

IEP-guided instruction highlights the role of Individualized Education Plans in shaping teaching decisions and goals. Teachers use individualized targets to guide instruction and monitor progress, ensuring systematic and goal-oriented support for learners with special needs (Bateman & Herr, 2020; Friend & Cook, 2020).

Assessment-informed teaching underscores the importance of evaluating learners’ abilities and tracking progress to inform instruction. This approach allows teachers to identify strengths and needs, supporting targeted and responsive teaching (Black & Wiliam, 2020; Hattie, 2021).

Recognition of individual learning pace further reflects that learners progress at different rates, requiring flexible pacing, repetition, and scaffolding to enhance competence and confidence (Vygotsky, 1978; Hattie, 2021; OECD, 2021).

Varied teaching strategies, including the use of visual aids and simplified instruction, support comprehension and engagement. These approaches demonstrate the importance of creativity and adaptability in inclusive teaching (Tomlinson, 2021; Sharma & Sokal, 2022).

Table 4: Formulated Meaning to Cluster Meaning to Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Public school SPED classes have very high student numbers	High student population	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Public school classrooms involve larger groups and more varied behavioral needs	Increased classroom complexity	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Inclusive classrooms combine students with different learning needs	Inclusive classroom demands	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education

Teaching diverse learners demands flexible instructional approaches	Inclusive classroom demands	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Wide age range increases instructional complexity	Inclusive classroom demands	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Some learners require instruction below grade level	Inclusive classroom demands	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Teachers must simultaneously address multiple learner groups	Inclusive classroom demands	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Large enrollment creates emotional and workload pressure for teachers	Workload and organizational pressure	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Limited manpower increases workload and responsibility	Workload and organizational pressure	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Public schools provide fewer support personnel and resources	Resource constraints	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Resource room or pull-out programs are used for targeted intervention	Resource room system	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Structured scheduling is necessary to serve many students	Structured scheduling	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education
Formal diagnosis guides placement and intervention	Formal classification system	Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education

Theme 4: Confronting Systemic Realities in Public Education

Confronting Systemic Challenges in Public Education describes teachers’ experiences with structural constraints such as large class sizes, limited resources, time constraints, multiple responsibilities, and inconsistent support, all of which affect the implementation of inclusive education. Despite these barriers, teachers remain committed to supporting diverse learners.

Large class sizes in public schools limit classroom management and individualized support, making it difficult to address diverse needs effectively (Blatchford et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). Insufficient materials further hinder lesson preparation and differentiated instruction, highlighting the importance of adequate resources for inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Limited instructional time, divided among many learners, reduces opportunities for individualized support (Friend & Cook, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Teachers also face increased workload due to administrative tasks and multiple responsibilities, which reduces time for planning and learner support (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2020). In addition, inconsistent assistance and limited institutional support affect the effective implementation of inclusive practices, emphasizing the need for stronger systemic backing (Florian & Camedda, 2020; Ainscow, 2020).

Table 5: Formulated Meaning to Theme Clusters to Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Each learner contributes uniquely to the teacher’s professional learning	Learning from individual students	Professional Growth Through Experience
Learners possess individual characteristics requiring personalized approaches	Learning from individual students	Professional Growth Through Experience
Learners display diverse behavioral and emotional characteristics	Learning from individual students	Professional Growth Through Experience
Continuous exposure to new learners promotes ongoing professional development	Ongoing learning through practice	Professional Growth Through Experience
Instructional strategies are designed to address specific learner needs and conditions	Ongoing learning through practice	Professional Growth Through Experience
Teachers refine instructional decisions based on learners’ responses and progress	Reflective practice	Professional Growth Through Experience

Inclusive teaching strengthens competencies in evaluation and behavior management	Skill development through inclusion	Professional Growth Through Experience
Teaching diverse cohorts expands professional knowledge and skills over time	Skill development through inclusion	Professional Growth Through Experience
Experience enhances the ability to identify developmental differences	Skill development through inclusion	Professional Growth Through Experience
Practical experience leads to the creation of effective inclusive teaching strategies	Skill development through inclusion	Professional Growth Through Experience
Effective teaching requires flexibility and individualized instructional approaches	Adaptability as core skill	Professional Growth Through Experience
Inclusive environments foster professional competence in managing diverse classrooms	Professional skill enhancement	Professional Growth Through Experience

Theme 5: Professional Growth Through Experience

Professional Growth Through Experience explains how teachers develop knowledge, skills, and confidence through continued exposure to inclusive classrooms. Experience enhances instructional competence, classroom management, confidence, and adaptability, showing that professional growth occurs through practice, reflection, and engagement with diverse learners.

Teachers reported that continuous practice refined their instructional approaches and improved their ability to address diverse needs, supporting research that links experience to pedagogical effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2020; OECD, 2021). They also noted increased confidence over time, which strengthens instructional decision-making and the use of inclusive practices (Bandura, 1997; Sharma & Sokal, 2022; Florian, 2021). Additionally, experience improved their ability to manage behavior and maintain supportive learning environments, which are essential for engagement in inclusive settings (Emmer & Sabornie, 2020; Sugai & Simonsen, 2021).

Teachers further demonstrated flexibility by modifying instruction based on learners' readiness and abilities, ensuring meaningful participation. Such adaptive teaching supports inclusive learning and effective engagement for all students (Tomlinson, 2021; Florian & Camedda, 2020).

Table 6: Formulated Meaning to Theme Clusters to Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Teaching learners with special needs is experienced as deeply personal	Emotional significance of teaching	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Teacher gains emotional fulfillment from students' growth and inclusion	Emotional significance of teaching	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Supporting learners evokes strong emotional involvement	Emotional significance of teaching	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Inclusive teaching promotes personal emotional development	Transformative emotional growth	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Participation in inclusive education provides emotional relief and purpose	Meaning beyond professional duty	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Teaching reshapes personal values toward compassion	Moral and professional transformation through practice	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Teaching profoundly influences emotional identity	Moral and professional transformation through practice	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling

Teacher views SPED teaching as a divine vocation	Spiritual interpretation of role	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Teaching is perceived as a moral and vocational commitment	Vocational identity	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Public school service increases sense of purpose	Vocational identity	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling
Compassion becomes internalized beyond professional duty	Vocational identity	Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling

Theme 6: Emotional Commitment and Sense of Calling

This reflects teachers’ deep dedication, passion, and fulfillment in teaching diverse learners, especially those with special needs. Teachers view inclusive education not only as a professional responsibility but as a meaningful vocation that fosters purpose, motivation, and persistence.

Teachers expressed joy and fulfillment in supporting learners’ academic and social growth, reinforcing their commitment and aligning with research linking meaningful work to motivation and job satisfaction (Day & Gu, 2020; Kelchtermans, 2021). They also linked their work to personal values, strengthening their sense of purpose, resilience, and dedication to inclusive education (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Collie, 2021).

Learners’ progress served as a key source of motivation, driving teachers’ continued effort and support (Darling-Hammond, 2020; OECD, 2021). Their strong desire to help students achieve their goals further enhanced engagement and learning outcomes (Florian & Camedda, 2020; Hattie, 2021).

Table 7: Formulated Meaning to Theme Clusters to Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Parent misconceptions minimized the educational value of SPED instruction	Parental misconceptions about SPED practices	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Lack of parental awareness leads to inaccurate perceptions of teaching practices	Parental misconceptions about SPED practices	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Teacher experienced unfair criticism due to misinterpretation of events	Emotional impact of negative feedback	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Criticism caused emotional distress	Emotional impact of negative feedback	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Stress impaired the teacher’s ability to respond effectively	Psychological strain during conflict situations	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Lack of direct communication intensified professional hurt	Importance of transparent communication	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Teacher advocates for open communication with parents	Importance of transparent communication	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Criticism led to self-doubt about professional competence	Questioning professional identity	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Teacher defended the instructional validity of SPED activities	Advocacy for professional practice	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Parental encounters cause emotional strain	Conflict, acceptance and emotional resilience	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience
Teacher accepts limits in controlling others’ perceptions	Conflict, acceptance and emotional resilience	Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience

Theme 7: Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Resilience

Emotional Vulnerability and Resilience describe teachers’ experiences of emotional challenges in inclusive classrooms and their development of resilience to manage them. Inclusive teaching involves stress, fatigue, and emotional demands that require patience, regulation, and perseverance. Despite these challenges, teachers remain committed and develop coping strategies to sustain their professional responsibilities.

Teachers reported stress linked to managing behavioral issues and diverse learner needs, highlighting the emotional effort required in inclusive classrooms (Jennings & Greenberg, 2020; OECD, 2021). They also experienced fatigue due to workload and responsibilities, which can contribute to stress or burnout if not properly managed (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020; Collie, 2021). Patience, understanding, and self-control were emphasized as essential for maintaining supportive classroom environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2020; Hargreaves, 2020).

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience by continuing their work and reframing difficulties as opportunities for growth and improved practice (Gu & Day, 2020; Beltman et al., 2021). This resilience strengthens their capacity to support diverse learners and sustain inclusive teaching practices.

Table 8: Formulated Meaning to Theme Clusters to Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
Public school employment is perceived as offering greater long-term stability and security	Seeking stable and secure employment	Stability and Career Security
Public school work is viewed as meaningful service within a broader inclusive education system	Viewing public service as purposeful career choice	Stability and Career Security
Effective inclusion depends on institutional and systemic backing	Need for organizational support for sustainability	Stability and Career Security
Lack of support may lead to teacher stress and burnout	Risk of burnout without adequate support	Stability and Career Security

Theme 8: Stability and Career Security

Stability and Career Security reflect teachers’ experiences of stable employment, financial reliability, and long-term career continuity in the teaching profession. Public school teaching is perceived as a secure career that provides consistent income, permanence, and institutional benefits, supporting teachers’ commitment to the profession and their personal and professional needs.

Teachers viewed public school employment as stable and long-term, which strengthens confidence and supports motivation and retention (Toropova et al., 2021; OECD, 2020). They also noted that consistent salary contributes to job satisfaction and financial security, both of which help sustain motivation and reduce turnover (Borman & Dowling, 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Furthermore, teachers expressed intentions to remain in the profession, seeing teaching as a long-term career that supports professional identity and growth (Day & Gu, 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021). Benefits such as compensation and insurance were also valued for enhancing job security and well-being, contributing to retention and satisfaction (Podolsky et al., 2020; Ingersoll, 2021).

DISCUSSION

These themes collectively illustrate how teachers adapt to inclusive teaching while sustaining professional commitment, instructional effectiveness, and emotional engagement. Teachers undergo professional transitions that require adjustments to instruction, classroom management, and expectations, reflecting the ongoing reconstruction of professional identity through flexibility and adaptability (Flores & Day, 2021; OECD, 2020). Managing classroom diversity is central, as teachers address varied academic, behavioral, and developmental needs through adaptive and differentiated practices that promote equity and accessibility (Florian & Beaton, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Differentiated and individualized instruction is essential, with teachers modifying materials, pacing, and assessments to enhance engagement and learning outcomes (Tomlinson, 2021; Graham et al., 2020).

Systemic challenges in public education, including large class sizes, limited resources, and administrative workload, constrain inclusive practices, though collaboration and institutional support can improve outcomes

(Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). At the same time, professional growth through experience strengthens teachers' confidence, competence, and adaptability through ongoing practice and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Avalos, 2021).

Emotional commitment frames teaching as meaningful and purpose-driven, with intrinsic motivation sustaining engagement (Hargreaves, 2020; Duffy et al., 2021). Despite emotional demands, including stress and fatigue, teachers demonstrate resilience through patience and perseverance, supporting well-being and long-term commitment (Gu & Day, 2020; Beltman et al., 2021).

Stability and career security further contribute to retention and satisfaction because public school teaching offers financial reliability and long-term opportunities (Toropova et al., 2021; OECD, 2020).

Overall, inclusive teaching requires continuous adaptation, emotional engagement, and professional commitment. These experiences shape teachers' identities and foster inclusive learning environments, underscoring the need for strengthened professional development, institutional support, and well-being initiatives (UNESCO, 2023; Klassen & Kim, 2024).

Teachers' Lived Experiences in Inclusive Education

The essence of teachers' experiences in handling inclusion in public elementary schools reflects a dynamic process of professional adaptation, instructional responsiveness, emotional commitment, and resilience. Inclusive teaching is not only a pedagogical practice but also an ongoing professional journey that requires continuous learning, flexibility, and dedication to address diverse academic, behavioral, and developmental needs.

Teachers undergo professional transitions from traditional to inclusive approaches, requiring differentiated and individualized instruction alongside adjustments in teaching strategies, classroom management, and instructional delivery to ensure equitable participation and learning.

Managing diversity highlights the complexity of addressing varied learner needs within one classroom. Teachers use differentiated instruction to design responsive learning experiences that support both academic and social development while promoting accessibility and engagement.

Systemic challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and administrative demands shape their work. Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrate commitment through resourcefulness, collaboration, and continuous professional learning that enhance reflective practice and effectiveness.

Professional growth develops through experience, strengthening competence, confidence, and adaptability as teachers engage in ongoing reflection and practice within inclusive settings.

Emotional commitment and a sense of calling are central, with teachers finding meaning and fulfillment in learners' progress, reinforcing dedication and persistence.

Teachers also experience emotional vulnerability, including stress and fatigue, but build resilience through patience, emotional regulation, and coping strategies that sustain their engagement and support for learners.

Stability and career security further reinforce commitment by providing financial reliability and continuity that support long-term professional engagement.

Overall, inclusive teaching is characterized by continuous adaptation, emotional engagement, and professional commitment. Teachers navigate diversity, systemic constraints, and emotional demands while developing resilience and competence, shaping their professional identity and fostering inclusive learning environments.

The phenomenon is fundamentally shaped by instructional, emotional, professional, and systemic factors, indicating that effective inclusive education requires pedagogical skill, emotional resilience, sustained commitment, and strong institutional support.

CONCLUSION

Teachers in inclusive classrooms manage diverse learners by adapting instructional strategies, addressing behavior, and responding to evolving needs. They develop flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving skills, supported by collaboration, parent communication, and professional development. While their work is often rewarding, it also involves stress and limited recognition. Systemic challenges such as heavy workloads, limited resources, and insufficient support affect their practice, highlighting the need for stronger institutional backing. Overall, effective inclusive education depends on teachers' skills, commitment, collaboration, and supportive policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Department of Education should provide continuous professional development on managing diverse learners, differentiation, and classroom strategies.
- Training programs should address procedural, psychological, and instructional dimensions for both pre-service and in-service teachers.
- School administrators should implement mentorship programs, workshops, and collaborative activities to support teacher development and teamwork between general and special education teachers.
- Schools should promote activities that strengthen collaboration and camaraderie among teachers to enhance inclusive practices.

Policy Implications

Policies should ensure that teachers are equipped with adequate skills, training, and support to meet the diverse needs of learners. Induction programs, ongoing professional development, mentorship, and participation in learning communities and specialized workshops are essential for strengthening inclusive education and reducing professional isolation.

Limitations

The study involved a small sample of three teachers from a single location, limiting generalizability. Voluntary participation and time constraints further reduced the sample size. As a phenomenological study, it focused on subjective experiences, which limits broader applicability. The two-month data collection period may also have limited thematic depth.

Implications for Future Research

Further studies should explore teachers' experiences across different regions and educational levels to capture a broader range of contexts. Future research should also examine effective strategies for inclusive teaching and learning and include the perspectives of administrators, parents, and students to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education. Additionally, studies with larger, more diverse samples are needed to improve the generalizability of the findings. Finally, further investigation is recommended on how inclusive teaching influences teachers' professional growth and professional identity.

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