

Lived Experiences of 21st Century Teachers in Inclusive Education

Christian T. Galgao*, Jeson J. Galgo, Arthur John T. Hibaya,
Sheba Flourdelise M. Sotil, Jocelyn B. Doliente
Cebu Technological University, Cebu City, Philippines

*Corresponding Author Email: christiangalgao9@gmail.com

Date received: September 5, 2025

Date revised: September 24, 2025

Date accepted: October 6, 2025

Originality: 99%

Grammarly Score: 99%

Similarity: 1%

Recommended citation:

Galgao, C., Galgo, J., Hibaya, A. J., Sotil, S. F., & Doliente, J. (2025). Lived experiences of 21st century teachers in inclusive education. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 3(10), 598-604.
<https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2025.658>

Abstract. This study explored the lived experiences of 21st-century teachers in inclusive education at San Miguel Technical Vocational School to gain deeper insights into their challenges, strategies, and the meanings they attach to their work during the 2025-2026 school year, providing a basis for implications for practice. It used a qualitative phenomenological design. This study involved 10 participants, selected through purposive sampling, who taught junior and senior high school classes and were interviewed by the researcher using open-ended questions. The data gathered were subjected to thematic analysis. Findings revealed that the participants' lived experiences of the 21st century in inclusive education involved the use of differentiated instruction and collaborative learning. They encountered challenges and successes in navigating inclusive teaching practices: time constraints for differentiated preparation, teacher transformation and growth, and impactful and fulfilling experiences. Moreover, the meanings they associate with their professional roles as inclusive educators in a 21st-century classroom context were ensuring equitable learning opportunities and providing the necessary support for effective inclusive teaching. Teachers often embrace differentiated instruction and collaborative learning to meet the diverse needs of learners, but they frequently struggle with limited time and resources to fully implement these strategies. Despite these problems, the teachers' commitment to providing all students with equal learning opportunities demonstrates their dedication. It highlights the need for more systemic support to maintain inclusive teaching in today's classrooms. Embracing the recommended practices can help ensure the continuous growth of inclusive education, ultimately creating learning environments where every child feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Keywords: Special education; Lived experiences; Challenges and successes; Inclusive education; Professional roles

1.0 Introduction

Inclusive education values the diversity of all learners by creating a supportive, respectful, and responsive learning setting. It is a defender of the understanding that education is the birthright of all, not a luxury shared by the few. Inclusive education removes barriers to learning and creates more opportunities for everyone, including students with disabilities, by enabling all students to learn, contribute, and participate in all aspects of education and school life.

Despite the strong push for inclusive education, its realization faces significant hurdles. Teachers today are expected to carry out multiple and frequently complex tasks; they often must tailor their lessons to suit a range of diverse learners, handle disruptions and challenging behavior, teach one-to-one strategies and give personal attention, encourage a sense of inclusion in their class, and open the door to participation for each pupil. Duquette (2022) has undergone significant changes in response to these expectations. Internationally, Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) research highlights that countries that embrace and promote inclusion still face uneven practical application, as in resource-poor settings. Many teachers continue to express concerns about being inadequately prepared, lacking sufficient training, and working within educational systems that do not fully support inclusive practices.

Several educational systems worldwide have pockets of best practice, such as Finland's emphasis on early intervention, Canada's commitment to teaching models involving co-teaching, and the UK's clear legislative landscape, which governs special needs education. However, significant gaps persist, both at the international level and within the Philippine context. These issues often stem from inadequate training, limited stakeholder engagement, and misalignment between policy and practices at the classroom level (UNESCO, 2020). These gaps are more intensified in rural and marginalized communities, where overcrowded classrooms, a paucity of learning materials, and a lack of support staff contribute to limiting the number of effective inclusive education programs.

In a Philippine setting, Alido et al. (2023) explored teachers' readiness to teach inclusive classes. They identified that while many have goodwill, a large number still feel poorly trained, unsupported, and unable to adapt their teaching to the needs and characteristics of all students due to insufficient instruction, limited resources, and barriers to adapting the instructional process to the diversity of the students. In parallel, Arnaiz-Sánchez et al. (2023) identified critical deficiencies in pre-service and in-service teacher training, interventionist attitudes, and weak institutional support. These studies reinforce the importance of ongoing professional development, well-planned capacity building, and practical policy implementation that can better equip teachers to provide effective and meaningful inclusive education.

At the grassroots level, the situation in schools in rural areas, such as in Bohol province, illustrates long-standing gaps between policy intentions and the realities of how policies are implemented. These rural community teachers also experience challenges, including limited resources, a lack of special education training, and minimal institutional support. In their study on public schools in the Visayas, Beltran et al. (2025) stated that teachers in the region are ready to adopt inclusive practices but are instead faced with the 'overwhelming' burden of being responsive to the needs of all learners.

This highlights the need to capture the experiences of teachers who practice inclusive education in rural schools in the Philippines. There are numerous policies and training programs, but these policies do not adequately consider the realities of teachers, including large class sizes, a lack of materials and resources, and insufficient support from the school and system. There is a significant gap in qualitative research on what these teachers, working in under-resourced schools, describe as complexities in their practice. This lived experience will help bridge the gap between policy and practice, and as a result, make inclusive education concepts more responsive to the realities of teachers. If these teachers are not prioritized, then the proposed programs will be misdirected from the real contexts to which inclusive education is supposed to be implemented.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the lived experiences of 21st-century teachers in implementing inclusive education at San Miguel Technical Vocational School. It endeavors to highlight true stories that embody the practicalities of teaching inclusively in a rural context. Understanding these experiences is vital for designing more effective, practical, and responsive teacher development programs, as well as for implementing policies and considering the lived experiences of practitioners for inclusive education purposes.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research utilized phenomenological qualitative research methods to investigate the experiences of teachers living in the 21st century in inclusive education. Creswell (2012, p. 76) stated that a phenomenological study describes the ordinary meaning that several individuals attribute to their lived experiences of a concept or

phenomenon. This approach is relevant because it is geared towards understanding the teacher's stream of consciousness, feelings, thoughts, reflections, and meaning-making in the context of inclusive education.

2.2 Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants of this study consist of junior and senior high school teachers from San Miguel Technical Vocational School who are currently engaged in inclusive education. These teachers are selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that only those with direct experience handling inclusive classes and learners with special educational needs are included. Participants must have at least one year of experience in inclusive teaching to provide substantial and reflective insights relevant to the study. This is a small study of 10 subjects. Quality criteria for phenomenological research inform this figure. Data collection continues until no new themes, concepts, or insights are being deduced from the data, or until these data are rigorously examined. Qualitative phenomenology typically has a sample size range of 5 to 25 (Creswell & Poth, 2016), with most studies reaching data saturation after 12 interviews, and the central themes usually emerging after 6 (Raehimi & Khatooni, 2024).

2.3 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument is a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher, which is aligned with the study's research questions. The guide includes open-ended prompts that explore the participants' experiences, challenges, strategies, and insights concerning inclusive education. It also allows flexibility for follow-up questions, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into meaningful responses as they emerge.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

During the preparation stage, the necessary endorsement is obtained from the educator and, if necessary, from the ethics review board. Only after permission is obtained can the researcher utilize purposive sampling to identify qualified individuals, namely, teachers with at least one year of experience managing inclusive classrooms. Each selected participant is provided with an informed consent form stating the objectives of the research, the confidentiality that will be guaranteed, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. The data collection phase begins once consent is granted and involves in-depth, semi-structured interviews implemented via Google form, according to participants' preferences and availability. These interviews adhere to a validated interview schedule consistent with the research question. As the interviews were conducted online, the researcher ensured a reliable internet connection was available at the time of the interview. The collected data was correctly recorded with their consent to prevent any potential data missing or inconsistency.

After every interview, the interviewee proceeds to the post-interview stage of the process. The conversations are recorded, and the participants' words are transcribed to protect the narratives of the subjects. The performed script is subsequently returned to the subjects, allowing participants to verify and authenticate the accuracy of the recorded statements and add any necessary clarifications. This process increases the study's authenticity by confirming that the subjects' accounts are accurately recorded. The transcripts are then gathered safely and prepared for thematic analysis. Throughout the study, the privacy and identity of every individual subject have been protected at all times.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The data gathered from the interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across participants. This approach allows the researcher to explore the depth and complexity of the participants systematically lived experiences in inclusive education. Specifically, the study will adopt the six-phase framework of Clarke and Braun (2013), which provides a structured process for developing meaningful themes from raw data. The first step is reading the transcripts repeatedly, getting to know what has been discussed. Next, important words, sentences, or expressions are identified and noted as initial codes based on their relationship to the questions being asked. In the third step, related codes are grouped into larger categories under which common themes can be identified.

At step four, the researcher reviews how well the codes support each theme and how accurately they reflect the whole dataset. In step five, themes are defined and named, accompanied by descriptions that capture the essence of the theme and its relevance to the study objective. Finally, in the sixth phase, the researcher produces the final report, integrating the study's descriptions and direct excerpts from participants to illustrate each theme. The

researcher remains reflexive, prepared for surprises and insights that may emerge. Manual coding ensures a thorough engagement with the data, while member checking results are considered to validate authenticity in the themes, making the voices and lives of these participants genuine reflections that emerge from a rigorous process.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

During the preparation phase, formal approval was received from the relevant parties, including the school principal and the research ethics review committee. After identifying the research sites, the researcher used a purposeful sampling technique to select participants who met the criteria of having at least one year of experience in teaching an inclusive class. Each selected participant was given an informed consent form outlining the study's aim, confidentiality measures, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The findings from the semi-structured interviews with the 10 teacher participants regarding the aforementioned variables of this study are discussed through thematic analysis. Accordingly, in terms of the participants' lived experiences, participants' education, the following were the emerging themes: 1) Use of Differentiated Instruction, 2) Collaborative Learning, 3) Time Constraints for Differentiated Preparation, 4) Teacher Transformation and Growth, 5) Impactful and Fulfilling Experiences, 6) Ensuring Equitable Learning Opportunities, 7) Needed Support for Effective Inclusive Teaching. Meanwhile, the most reported challenges and successes encountered in navigating inclusive teaching practices were: 1) Limited Training, 2) Time Constraints, and 3) Behavioral Issues.

3.1 Participants' Lived Experiences in Inclusive Education

Theme 1: Use of Differentiated Instruction

Teachers adapt the types of instructional materials to accommodate students' diverse learning styles, employing a range of methods that include visual, auditory, and kinesthetic approaches. Their daily activities used to begin with greetings or prayers, which were designed to create a sense of belonging, and would often conclude with reflections or formative assessments. This method, which is both structured and flexible, allows inclusivity to be present in the daily teaching. Teachers utilize different measures to meet the varied needs of learners:

"I generally use a combination of different instructional methods-visual materials, group discussions, and hands-on activities to handle the varied abilities and skills of learners skillfully." (Participant 1)

"I usually have my students at the door and simply explain my lesson. I use different activities and tools to help students learn and feel included." (Participant 5)

"Basically, I do teach to ensure that information is clear and also delivered in different ways so that we can meet all the needs of the learners." (Participant 6)

Teachers employ various methods to ensure that all learners, regardless of their abilities or background, are actively engaged in the learning process. To establish psychological safety, daily routines are implemented that allow for differentiated tasks, enabling participants to play a meaningful role. These activities align with the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Thus, teachers' differentiated instruction and adaptable strategies reflect Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, which expounds on the social nature of interaction and the scaffolding process. (Hoose, 2020). Their various instructional activities align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning, which emphasize the use of multiple means of engagement and representation (CAST, 2018). Ioannidi and Malafantis (2022) corroborate this evidence by pointing out that inclusive pedagogy becomes a matter of equity and belonging. At the same time, Fisher and Frey (2021) emphasized the importance of scaffolding practices in diverse classrooms.

Theme 2: Collaborative Learning

Participants emphasized the importance of creating opportunities where learners collaborate, support one another, and develop meaningful relationships that foster mutual respect and understanding. Teachers also pointed out the need for a school culture that encourages teamwork among educators in planning and

implementing inclusive strategies:

"I, as an inclusive teacher, have seen collaborative learning as a tool that breaks down the proverbial walls between students. In my class, peer interaction is so powerful that even those with special needs who formerly felt isolated are now quite willing to participate and become engaged. It is certainly not always a walk in the park, but the positive influence on their self-confidence is there for everyone to see." (Participant 3)

"Through my experience, I have learned that co-planning lessons with my fellow teachers is the most effective strategy for handling a diverse class. Collaboration is not only among students – it is also among us teachers. By sharing the strategies and resources, the burden is reduced and the outcomes for all learners are improved." (Participants 6)

"The group activities in my class frequently become instruments for students to develop the trait of empathy. For instance, we once included a student with ADHD in a science group experiment. His groupmates made accommodations for him, and he actually went on to give the presentation. That is the power of collaboration." (Participant 8)

The participants' focus on the necessity of professional training, the availability of staff, and the provision of sufficient resources highlights the crucial role of cooperative learning in an inclusive education system. Their encounters are consistent with the results presented by Liu et al. (2021), who point out that the involvement of procedure-supported collaboration is necessary for an inclusive system of teaching, and with Putra (2023), who accentuates that the proper adjustment of instruction, being one of the everyday tasks of the teaching staff, facilitates the dialogue among educators.

3.2 Challenges and Successes in Navigating Inclusive Teaching Practices

Theme 1: Time Constraints for Differentiated Preparation

Teachers need to adapt their teaching methods, provide diverse materials for different pupils, and create a learning environment that is suitable for all children, all while adhering to the curriculum and established standards. Accepting the reality that teachers face in their daily lives becomes necessary if one is to see any progress in developing efficient support systems that are responsive to teachers' needs. Teachers have to juggle systemic and classroom-level issues.

"One of the most frequent problems that the staff encounter when working with children who differ in needs is the insufficient teacher preparation, particularly regarding the inclusive pedagogical methods." (Participant 1)

"One of the hardest challenges is tailoring the content and the learning speed that would fit all the students during a single class." (Participant 5)

"Providing different content under tight schedules, managing disruptive behaviors, and trying to 'foresee' (or) 'combat' diverse levels of abilities and skills." (Participant 6)

Each survey revealed systemic issues, including a lack of training, behavioral management difficulties, and insufficient resources. The barriers identified in the study align with Ainscow's (2024) argument, which posits that for inclusion to succeed, institutional obstacles must be dismantled and the school culture transformed. The claim is further supported by the research of Mackey et al. (2023) and Szczecinski (2025), who argue in favor of training and positive behavior support strategies. Additionally, Haines et al. (2022) highlight the scarcity of resources in rural areas.

Theme 2: Teacher Transformation and Growth

Inclusive education transforms teachers' professional lives into 'empathetic, reflective practitioners and pedagogic visionaries. All but two participants noted a broader sense of mission beyond content transmission:

"In a significant way, inclusive teaching changed the way I thought and treated the people by showing me more flexibility, more compassion, and more imagination." (Participant 1)

"It was learning for me, which I have to relate to every learner because every one of them is different with his or her own learning benchmark." (Participant 4)

"Personally, it taught me to appreciate that I can teach not only the competent ones in everything but also the differently-abled as well." (Participant 3)

Teachers become more responsive, patient, and empathetic, as Alamo and Llorent (2024) have speculated, where inclusive teaching revitalizes teacher practice and identity. The shift is based on Vygotsky's social constructivism; Vygotsky's teachers are transformed through continuous interaction with diverse learners' contexts.

Theme 3: Impactful and Fulfilling Experiences

The participants emphasized that such experiences were poignant and redemptive, providing them with a new sense of purpose and direction in their profession. Such valuable and meaningful experiences typically served as turning points that motivated the participants' efforts and sacrifices. They articulated these experiences convincingly and genuinely, suggesting that such experiences yielded emotional and professional dividends:

"Among my proudest achievements are seeing students who had previously struggled academically or socially become confident and successful through one-on-one support." (Participant 1)

"One of my proudest achievements was when a struggling, shy child became more confident and really improved... They wrote me a nice letter saying thanks for believing in them." (Participant 8)

"Seeing your high school students graduate and gradually fulfill their goals." (Participant 2)

These are the moments when their work is truly worthy, demanding inclusive practices in the midst of everyday challenges. Achievements realized that teachers, as students, gained confidence and could overcome adversity, vindicating Falon et al. (2021), who emphasize teacher resilience based on positive student outcomes and positive learning environments.

3.3 Professional Roles as Inclusive Educators in a 21st Century Classroom Context

Theme 1: Ensuring Equitable Learning Opportunities

The transformation of the students' dignity and success, and the promotion of all students are things that all teachers claim for themselves. Beyond the walls of the classroom, teaching is about the nurturing and the growing of the social justice, compassionate progress of the person, which:

"In an inclusive setting, I perceive my role as a facilitator of fair learning opportunities, and all students are valued and assisted." (Participant 1)

"To be an inclusive teacher today means to develop a learning community in which all learners – whatever their background, ability, or learning style – are valued, supported, and provided with fair opportunities to thrive." (Participant 1)

"An inclusive teacher shares his passion and love for the growth and well-being of the students." (Participant 7)

Teachers see themselves as Ainscow's actors and agents, which agrees with Ainscow's (2024) argument that inclusion necessitates cultural and systemic transformation. The teachers' standing is echoed by Hunter et al. (2023), who emphasize the roles of teachers in producing responsive and equitable classrooms.

Theme 2: Needed Support for Effective Inclusive Teaching

Teachers in this scenario are not only seeking extra support but also advocating for a system that acknowledges the intricacy of inclusive education. This features accessible learning materials, well-qualified support staff, continuous professional development, and a culture of collaboration between teachers, parents, and specialists:

"It would be wonderful if we could go back and do more advanced training in other types of learning needs and inclusive ways of teaching." (Participant 1)

"The things that would help me in my search for teaching inclusively would be additional training in the strategies that are needed, having available to us teaching aides or assistants, and plenty of learning materials developed specifically for needs

other than typical ones." (Participant 5)

"School administration must offer a good place for students to learn and a good support system for the teachers as far as classroom management is concerned." (Participant 7)

Teachers request a range of reforms at the system level, including support for policies, continuous capacity development, provision of resources, and infrastructure improvement, as the foundation for the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusivity. The teachers sought professional training, staff support, and resources, which aligns with the findings of Liu et al. (2021), who emphasize the importance of collaboration and systemic support, and Putra (2023), who highlights the significance of differentiated instructional planning.

4.0 Conclusion

The lived experiences of 21st-century teachers in inclusive education underscore the pivotal role of differentiated instruction and collaborative learning in meeting the diverse needs of learners. While time constraints in preparing differentiated lessons remain a pressing challenge, these teachers reported that the process fostered professional growth, broadened their perspectives, and deepened their commitment to equitable teaching. Their experiences underscore the dual reality faced by Filipino educators: the recognition of their vital role in promoting equitable learning opportunities, alongside the urgent need for stronger institutional support. The findings affirm the study's theoretical framework—Inclusive Education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Social Constructivism—by showing that inclusive practices are highly relevant and responsive to the varied needs of learners in Philippine classrooms. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that systemic reforms, ongoing teacher self-reflection, and evidence-based strategies are critical drivers in advancing inclusivity. Ultimately, this research highlights the responsibility of policymakers, school leaders, and educators to foster a culture that not only values but actively supports every learner. By embedding inclusivity in both practice and policy, the Philippine education system can move closer to realizing the vision of a genuinely inclusive 21st-century classroom—one where all students are empowered to learn, participate, and succeed.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Conceptualization, Research Design, Data Collection, Writing

Author 2: Methodology, Data Analysis, Interpretation of Results

Author 3: Literature Review, Development of Theoretical Framework, Validation of Instruments

Author 4: Supervision, Critical Revisions

Author 5: Resources, Data Curation, Proofreading

6.0 Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, whether public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the conduct and publication of this research study.

8.0 Acknowledgement

The researchers gratefully acknowledge the support of the school administrators, the cooperation of the teacher and student participants, and the invaluable guidance of their research adviser.

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