

"UNSEEN AND UNREADY: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN HANDLING LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS"

RUBEN A. ANTONIO JR^a, BRYAN L. CANCIO^b

^arubenjr.antonio@hcdc.edu.ph, ^bbryan.cancio@hcdc.edu.ph

^aGraduate School Student, Mati, Davao Oriental, Philippines, ^bProfessor, Holy Cross of Davao College

Abstract

The deployment of Pre-service teachers in the inclusive classroom posits unpreparedness to handle the educational needs of learners with special needs. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of pre-service teachers in handling learners with special needs in the inclusive education, particularly focusing on their development of critical consciousness, empowerment, and preparedness. The significance of this study provided insights into the gaps in teacher education programs and contributing to the improvement of inclusive teaching strategies. The results revealed three major themes: the struggle in developing critical consciousness due to limited exposure and unclear role perception; a sense of disempowerment brought by overwhelming classroom demands; and feelings of unpreparedness stemming from inflexible curricula and insufficient training. These experiences reflect a deep emotional burden carried by pre-service teachers as they attempt to fulfil the demands of inclusive education. In conclusion, the study underscores the need for more experiential and reflective components in teacher education programs. It is recommended that teacher education institutions strengthen inclusive education training through increased field immersion, mentorship, and skills-based instruction to better prepare future educators.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Pre-Service Teachers, Lived Experiences, Special Needs Learners, Teacher Preparedness

1. Introduction

The unpreparedness of pre-service teachers to effectively handle learners with special needs in inclusive education classrooms is a globally recognized issue (Mabanag et al., 2024). Across various countries, student teachers often express feelings of uncertainty and lack of confidence when placed in inclusive settings (Salo & Kajamies, 2024).

International studies further highlight this problem. A study conducted in Bahrain, revealed that pre-service teachers lacked confidence and adequate preparation to support students with special needs, reporting no opportunity to teach or interact with such students during their practicum (AlMahdi & Bukamal, 2019). In Pakistan, research indicated that while pre-service teachers had conceptual clarity about inclusion, there was a gap in their practical skills and knowledge to implement inclusive practices effectively (Pasha et al., 2021). Similarly, in Abu Dhabi, findings showed that existing curricula were insufficient in preparing pre-service teachers to work competently in inclusive environments, emphasizing the necessity for specialized training in special education and psychology (Massouti, 2021).

In the Philippines, studies corroborate these international findings. A research conducted at Cebu Technological University revealed that most pre-service teachers were not yet ready to embrace inclusive practices, indicating a lack of preparedness to implement inclusive education (Mabanag et al., 2024). Another study from Batangas State University found that while pre-service teachers had a high positive attitude towards inclusive education, there was a need for more effective teacher education programs focusing on collaborative teaching techniques and strategies to better prepare them for inclusive classrooms (Lualhati, 2022).

These findings collectively underscore an urgent need to address the gap in pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive education. Despite positive attitudes towards inclusion, the lack of practical skills and

comprehensive training programs hinders the effective implementation of inclusive practices. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensure that all learners, regardless of their abilities, receive quality education in inclusive settings.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore the experiences of pre-service teachers in handling learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom during their deployment in Rabat Rocamora Mati Central School SPED Center for school year 2024-2025.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following sub-problems:

1. What are the experiences of pre-service teachers in developing critical consciousness about inclusive education and learners with special needs?
2. What are the experiences of pre-service teachers in gaining a sense of empowerment to implement inclusive practices in the classroom?
3. What are the experiences of pre-service teachers that reflect their preparedness in handling learners with special needs in an inclusive education setting?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study anchored in Paulo Freire's Critical Theory, which emphasizes the significance of conscientization, or the development of critical consciousness. According to Freire, education should empower individuals to recognize and challenge oppressive structures within society. In this context, the inadequate preparation of pre-service teachers reflects a systemic issue within traditional teacher education programs that often fail to question dominant norms or critically engage future educators with the realities of diversity and inclusion. This lack of preparation perpetuates exclusion and marginalization of learners with special needs, reinforcing a hierarchical system that privileges the "normal" learner. Freire's theory calls for a transformative approach where teacher education empowers pre-service teachers to become agents of change—questioning inequitable practices, engaging in reflective dialogue, and embracing inclusive pedagogies that affirm the dignity and rights of all learners.

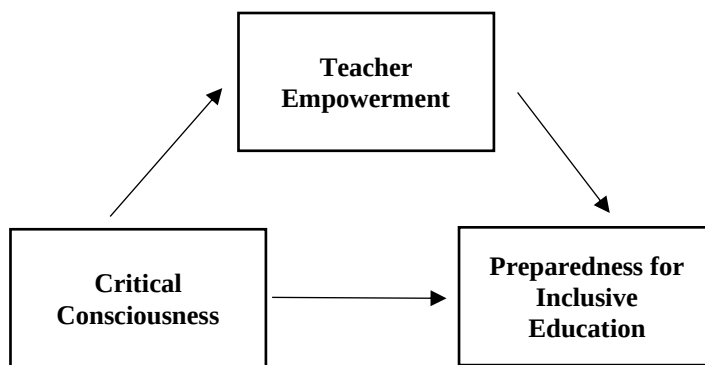


Figure 1. IPO Conceptual Framework of the Study

1. Method

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of pre-service teachers in handling learners with special needs within inclusive education classrooms. Further, phenomenology is particularly suited for this study as it focuses on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research aimed to capture the essence of participants' experiences through in-depth exploration. This approach allowed the researcher to explore human experiences, making it ideal for examining the experiences of pre-service teachers regarding inclusive education. The study consisted of (9) nine pre-service teachers from Davao Oriental State University in Mati City. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria for participants were: (1) The participants must be in his/her 4th year in the teacher education program at Davao Oriental State University, (2) The participants must be enrolled in a practicum subject specifically EDUC 145, (3) The participants were deployed in Rabat Rocamora Mati Central School SPED Center, (4) The participants must be a special education major and (5) The participants must have a direct experience in handling learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom. Exclusion criteria included: (1) The participants were not enrolled in TEI offered by Davao Oriental State University, (2) The participants were not able to complete necessary requirements such as FS 100 and 101 prior to EDUC 145, (3) The participants have no direct experiences in handling learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that allows for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in phenomenological research as they facilitate the collection of rich, detailed narratives (Creswell, 2013). An interview guide with nine open-ended questions was developed to elicit participants' thoughts, feelings, and reflections on their preparedness to handle learners with special needs. The guide was reviewed by experts in the field to ensure its relevance and clarity. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Society for Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE) of Holy Cross of Davao College. Participants were contacted via messenger and provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations. Upon obtaining written informed consent, interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted through google meet. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological analysis, which involves several systematic steps: (1) reading all participants' descriptions to acquire a general sense of the content, (2) extracting significant statements relevant to the phenomenon, (3) formulating meanings from these statements, (4) organizing the formulated meanings into clusters of themes, (5) integrating the results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, (6) formulating an essential structure of the phenomenon, and (7) returning the findings to participants for validation. The researcher engaged deeply with the data at each stage, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' original narratives. Member checking was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings. Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the study. Participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing all data. Only the research team had access to the data, and findings were reported in a manner that prevented the identification of individual participants.

2. Results and Discussion

This chapter elaborates the themes and subthemes of this study.

Experiences of Pre-service Teacher in Developing Critical Consciousness

Awareness Through First-Hand Encounters. Pre-service teachers often develop critical awareness of inclusive education through direct classroom experiences. For instance, a study by AlMahdi and Bukamal (2019) found that pre-service teachers in Bahrain did not have the opportunity to teach students with disabilities during their practicum, highlighting a gap in experiential learning that is essential for developing awareness and competence in inclusive settings.

"I experienced that one of my students in my English class was very inattentive and somehow very loud when expressing his thoughts. Somehow, it disrupted the whole class." IDI1

Struggles in Role Perception. Pre-service teachers frequently grapple with defining their roles in inclusive classrooms, often feeling unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students with special needs. This struggle is compounded by limited training and support, leading to uncertainty and stress. A study conducted by Jacob and Pillay (2022) observed that while pre-service teachers may acquire theoretical knowledge about inclusive education, they often find it challenging to envision themselves as inclusive educators in practice, indicating a disconnect between knowledge and role perception.

"As a pre-service teacher I am committed to provide quality education to every learner, but somehow it is very challenging for us to deal with their problems especially in terms on how they will interact to their classmates, learn during my class; given the small amount of time to fully know or understand their situation." IDI3

Inadequate Foundational Exposure. Limited exposure to inclusive settings during teacher education programs can result in pre-service teachers feeling ill-equipped to handle learners with special needs. This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive training and practical experiences in inclusive environments. A study by Grimminger-Seidensticker and Seyda (2022) emphasized that combining information-based instruction with structured fieldwork experiences can significantly improve pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, suggesting that foundational exposure is crucial for preparedness.

"During our FS 101, we were exposed in various educational setting including inclusive education classroom, but I know in myself that the knowledge that I gained is limited and this could result to unpreparedness in handling learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom." IDI5

Experiences of Pre-service Teachers in Gaining a Sense of Empowerment

Supportive Mentorship and Encouragement. Mentorship plays a crucial role in empowering pre-service teachers. Supportive relationships with experienced educators can boost confidence and competence in implementing inclusive practices (Paju et al., 2021). While specific studies on mentorship are limited in the provided sources, the general consensus in teacher education literature underscores the importance of mentorship in developing teaching efficacy (Chea, 2024).

"The encouragement of my Critique Teacher, she always encouraged me to go further, use my skills to develop instructional materials that will benefit the learners with special needs." IDI9

Competing Demands and Prioritization Challenges. Managing the needs of students with special needs alongside a full classroom presents significant challenges for pre-service teachers. Balancing these demands often leads to feelings of being overwhelmed and underprepared. An study by Carroll et al., (2022) highlighted that teachers in Australia face immense pressure to provide individualized support with limited resources, often leading to stress and burnout.

"It was very hard to deal with them, considering that there are 40 more students to deal with and one student to deal with care and utmost priority in tasks." IDI5

Self-Doubt and Perceived Inadequacy. Pre-service teachers frequently experience self-doubt regarding their ability to effectively teach in inclusive settings. This perceived inadequacy underscores the necessity for enhanced training and support systems. A study by Li and Cheung (2019) found that pre-service teachers' self-efficacy in implementing inclusive education is influenced by their attitudes, sentiments, and concerns, indicating that addressing these factors can help mitigate feelings of inadequacy.

"I think based on my performance; I can say that I am not fully capable to do the task of a teacher. Considering my weaknesses in dealing those learners, it made me more incapable." IDI7

Reflections of Pre-service Teachers on Preparedness for Inclusive Education

Difficulty in Implementing Differentiated Instruction. Implementing differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners with special needs is a common challenge among pre-service teachers. This difficulty often stems from insufficient training and resources. Nketsia et al., (2024) reported that pre-service teachers demonstrated a predominantly narrow understanding of differentiation, interpreting it mainly as a strategy for supporting struggling learners, which limits their ability to effectively implement inclusive practices.

"Specifically in providing individualized learning or differentiated learning, where I prepared multiple tasks to cater the interests and strength of each learner." IDI1

Inflexible Curriculum Constraints. Rigid curricula that do not accommodate the needs of learners with special needs hinder pre-service teachers' ability to implement inclusive practices effectively. Flexibility and adaptability in curriculum design are essential for inclusivity. A study by Yong et al., (2024) article discussed how the rise of autism and ADHD diagnoses in Australia has overwhelmed the education system, with teachers struggling to adapt curricula to meet diverse needs due to inadequate support and resources.

"As a pre-service teacher, I anchored my daily lessons in MELC provided by DEPED, knowing that the tasks and lessons there were not yet modified and adapted relevant to the needs of learners with special needs. As a result, it added a challenge to us to really think beyond the box to cater their needs and fully include whenever possible." IDI3

Limited Training Opportunities. A lack of comprehensive training opportunities in inclusive education leaves pre-service teachers feeling unprepared. Expanding such opportunities is critical for developing the necessary skills and confidence. Mabanag et al. (2024) identified pedagogical preparedness, professional efficacy, and resource concerns as key areas where pre-service teachers felt underprepared, suggesting that targeted interventions in these areas are necessary for effective inclusive education implementation.

"The only training that I can say was our field study 101 where we handle students in classroom setting, other than that there was no prior training for us to really be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge in handling learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom." IDI6

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that pre-service teachers face significant challenges in developing critical consciousness, gaining empowerment, and demonstrating preparedness in handling learners with special needs within inclusive education settings. Their experiences uncovered a persistent sense of unpreparedness rooted in limited practical exposure, unclear role perception, inadequate training, and the emotional strain of meeting diverse learner needs with constrained resources. Despite their commitment and willingness, many expressed feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, emphasizing the pressing need for a more responsive teacher education curriculum that truly equips them for inclusive practice.

Recommendation

It is recommended that teacher education institutions enhance their programs by embedding intensive, experiential learning opportunities focused on inclusive education. This includes structured field exposure, mentorship from experienced inclusive educators, and targeted training on differentiated instruction and curriculum adaptation. Furthermore, institutional support systems should be strengthened to foster a more empowering learning environment where pre-service teachers can build confidence and competence in delivering inclusive education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those who made this study possible. My sincere appreciation is given to the participants of this study who are the pre-service teachers from Davao Oriental State University who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights, which became the heart of this research. Also, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of our Professor Dr. Bryan Cancio who provided guidance and encouragement throughout the process. I am deeply thankful for my family and loved ones for their patience, understanding, and moral support during the entire journey of this academic endeavour. Lastly, to the Almighty God who always give me strength and wisdom to fully realize and pursue this study.

References

- AlMahdi, O., & Bukamal, H. (2019). Pre-Service Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education During Their Studies in Bahrain Teachers College. Sage Open, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019865772>
- Carroll, A., Forrest, K., Sanders-O'Connor, E., Flynn, L., Bower, J. M., Fynes-Clinton, S., York, A., & Ziaei, M. (2022). Teacher stress and burnout in Australia: examining the role of intrapersonal and environmental factors. Social psychology of education : an international journal, 25(2-3), 441–469. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-022-09686-7>

- Chea, C. (2024). Mentorship's role in shaping professional identity: insights from Cambodian teaching practicums. *Cogent Education*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2024.2419710>
- Colaizzi, P. (1978). Psychological research as a phenomenologist views it. In: Valle, R. S. & King, M. (1978). *Existential Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology*. Open University Press: New York.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4th Edition, SAGE Publications, Inc., London.
- Grimminger-Seidensticker, E., & Seyda, M. (2022). Enhancing attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusive teaching in physical education pre-service teachers: Results of a quasi-experimental study in physical education teacher education. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.909255>
- Jacob, U. S., & Pillay, J. (2022). A comparative study of pre-service teachers' knowledge and perceptions of, and attitudes toward, inclusive education. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1012797>
- Li, K. M., & Cheung, R. Y. M. (2019). Pre-service Teachers' Self-efficacy in Implementing Inclusive Education in Hong Kong: The Roles of Attitudes, Sentiments, and Concerns. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 68(2), 259–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912x.2019.1678743>
- Lualhati, G. P. (2022). Embracing diversity: Empowerment of Filipino preservice teachers for inclusive education. *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies* 22(2):265-272.
- Mabanag, R., & Delicana, A., & Igot, P., & Sitoy, R., & Tandag, J., & Mangubat, R., & Linco, D. (2024). Teacher Readiness and Challenges in Inclusive Classrooms. 4. 180-192. 10.30076/wjher.4.4.
- Massouti, A. (2021). Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on their Preparation for Inclusive Teaching: Implications for an Organizational Change in Teacher Education. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotlracea.2021.1.10611>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nketsia, W., Opoku, M. P., Amponteng, M., & Mprah, W. K. (2024). Exploring the perceived knowledge of teacher educators and pre-service teachers on the differentiated instruction practices of teacher educators. *Frontiers in Education*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1356675>
- Paju, B., Kajamaa, A., Pirttimaa, R., & Kontu, E. (2021). Collaboration for Inclusive Practices: Teaching Staff Perspectives from Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 66(3), 427–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1869087>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and policy in mental health*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Pasha, S., Yousaf, F., & Ijaz, M. (2021). Preparedness of Prospective Teachers for Inclusive Education: Pre-Service Teachers' Knowledge and Skills. *Review of Education, Administration & LAW*, 4(2), 355–363. <https://doi.org/10.47067/real.v4i2.148>
- Salo, A.-E., & Kajamies, A. (2024). Teacher candidates' preparedness to address diverse situations that can threaten pupils' well-being. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 140, 104470. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104470>
- Yong, J. G. S., Foon, M. Y. L., & Nor, N. A. B. C., (2024). BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR AUTISM IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.14646719>