

Bridging Theory and Practice: Lived Experiences of Isabela State University Pre-Service Teachers in Advancing Inclusive Education for Holistic Child Development within Health, Well-Being and Learning at Ugad Elementary School, Cabagan

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Abstract

Inclusive education has become a global educational priority that promotes equitable access to quality learning while supporting the holistic development, health, and well-being of all learners, regardless of ability, background, or learning needs. Teacher education institutions play a critical role in preparing future educators who possess the competencies, values, and inclusive pedagogical skills necessary to create supportive and learner-centered classrooms. Isabela State University (ISU), through its teacher education programs and institutional commitment to accessibility, inclusive learning, and equitable educational opportunities, continues to strengthen the preparation of pre-service teachers for inclusive educational practice. Despite the growing implementation of inclusive education in Philippine basic education, limited qualitative research has examined how pre-service teachers experience translating inclusive education theories into authentic classroom practice during field immersion. This study explores the lived experiences of Isabela State University pre-service teachers in advancing inclusive education for holistic child development within health, well-being, and learning at Ugad Elementary School, Cabagan. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study gathers narratives from purposively selected pre-service teachers through semi-structured interviews. The findings are expected to reveal how classroom immersion, collaboration with mentor teachers, learner diversity, and reflective practice influence the development of inclusive teaching competencies, professional identity, and commitment to holistic child development. The study contributes to teacher education, inclusive pedagogy, child development, educational psychology, and life sciences while supporting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Introduction

Inclusive education has evolved into a fundamental principle of educational reform aimed at ensuring that every learner receives equitable, meaningful, and quality education regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, gender, culture, or learning differences. Contemporary inclusive education extends beyond physical placement in mainstream classrooms by fostering learning environments that promote

participation, belongingness, well-being, academic achievement, and holistic child development. International frameworks emphasize that inclusive schools should address learners' cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and psychological needs through responsive teaching, collaborative partnerships, and learner-centered practices.

Holistic child development recognizes that children's academic success is closely

interconnected with their physical health, mental well-being, emotional security, social relationships, and overall quality of life. Consequently, inclusive classrooms require teachers who possess not only pedagogical competence but also empathy, adaptability, cultural responsiveness, and the ability to address diverse developmental needs. Within the life sciences perspective, child health, psychosocial well-being, and educational development are viewed as interconnected dimensions that influence lifelong learning, resilience, and human development. Preparing future teachers to understand these interrelationships has therefore become an important priority in teacher education.

Higher education institutions serve as the foundation for developing competent educators capable of implementing inclusive practices in diverse classroom settings. Through coursework, teaching demonstrations, reflective practice, and field immersion, pre-service teachers gradually bridge theoretical knowledge with authentic classroom experiences. These experiences provide opportunities to apply differentiated instruction, classroom management, collaborative learning, and individualized support strategies while responding to the diverse needs of learners. As a recognized teacher education institution, **Isabela State University (ISU)** continues to strengthen its commitment to quality teacher preparation through accredited education programs, inclusive learning initiatives, and institutional policies that promote accessibility, diversity, and equitable education.

Ugad Elementary School in Cabagan serves as an important learning environment where pre-service teachers encounter diverse learners with varying abilities, backgrounds, and educational needs. Through teaching internships and field experiences, they are exposed to authentic classroom situations that require the practical application of inclusive pedagogical principles. These experiences allow future teachers to develop instructional flexibility, professional confidence, reflective thinking, and collaborative competencies while promoting children's health, well-being, participation, and learning.

Although previous studies have examined teachers' attitudes, competencies, and readiness toward inclusive education, most have relied on quantitative approaches that measure perceptions and levels of preparedness. Recent work in Cabagan has documented opportunities and challenges in implementing inclusive education at the school level, yet it provides limited insight into the lived experiences of pre-service teachers during classroom immersion. Little is known about how future teachers interpret their experiences in translating inclusive education theory into practice while supporting holistic child development. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for strengthening teacher education curricula, improving field-based learning, and developing educators capable of creating inclusive learning environments that foster children's health, well-being, and lifelong learning.

Research Gap

Existing studies on inclusive education primarily examine teachers' attitudes, competencies, implementation practices, or institutional readiness using quantitative research designs. Although these investigations provide valuable evidence regarding the implementation of inclusive education, they offer limited understanding of how pre-service teachers personally experience inclusive teaching during field practice. Furthermore, few phenomenological studies have explored how pre-service teachers bridge theoretical knowledge and authentic classroom experiences while promoting holistic child development within health, well-being, and learning in Philippine elementary schools. This gap is particularly evident in Isabela State University and Ugad Elementary School, where limited qualitative evidence exists regarding the development of inclusive teaching competencies during teaching internships.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Isabela State University pre-service teachers in advancing inclusive education for holistic child development within health, well-being, and learning at Ugad Elementary School, Cabagan.

Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Describe the lived experiences of pre-service teachers in implementing inclusive education during field immersion.
2. Examine how classroom experiences influence their understanding of

holistic child development, health, and well-being.

3. Identify the opportunities and challenges encountered in implementing inclusive teaching practices.
4. Explore the meanings pre-service teachers attribute to inclusive education in their professional growth.
5. Develop recommendations for strengthening teacher education programs in inclusive education.

Literature Review

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of equitable and quality education that ensures all learners, regardless of disability, socioeconomic status, culture, gender, or learning needs, have meaningful opportunities to participate and succeed in school. It promotes learner-centered instruction, differentiated teaching, collaboration, and supportive learning environments that foster academic achievement, health, well-being, and social inclusion. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020), inclusive education is fundamental to achieving sustainable development because it empowers learners to reach their full potential while respecting diversity and promoting equal educational opportunities. For pre-service teachers, meaningful exposure to inclusive classroom practices strengthens professional

competence and prepares them to address the diverse developmental needs of children.

Holistic child development emphasizes the interconnected growth of children's cognitive, physical, emotional, social, behavioral, and psychological domains. Within the context of inclusive education, learners' health and well-being are recognized as essential foundations for effective learning and lifelong development. The World Health Organization (2021) emphasized that schools play a critical role in promoting children's physical and mental well-being through supportive educational environments, positive relationships, and inclusive practices. Consequently, teacher education programs should prepare future educators to integrate health, well-being, and inclusive pedagogies into classroom instruction to support every learner's holistic development.

Previous studies have shown that pre-service teachers generally possess positive attitudes toward inclusive education; however, many continue to experience challenges when applying inclusive teaching strategies during classroom immersion. Existing research has primarily focused on measuring readiness, attitudes, and competencies using quantitative approaches, while relatively few phenomenological studies have explored how pre-service teachers personally experience translating inclusive education theories into authentic classroom practice. This gap underscores the need to understand the lived experiences of pre-service teachers as they develop professional identity, inclusive pedagogical competence, and commitment to

holistic child development during field experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary theories. First, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (2015) explains that meaningful professional learning occurs through concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Field immersion enables pre-service teachers to transform theoretical knowledge into practical inclusive teaching competencies. Second, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978) emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction, collaboration, and guided participation, highlighting the importance of mentor teachers, learners, and school communities in shaping inclusive teaching practices. Finally, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022) serves as the methodological framework, allowing an in-depth exploration of how pre-service teachers interpret and construct meaning from their lived experiences in advancing inclusive education for holistic child development.

Conceptual Framework

The study adopts an Input–Process–Output (IPO) Framework to illustrate the research process.

Input includes pre-service teachers' knowledge of inclusive education, pedagogical preparation, field immersion experiences, learner diversity, mentor teacher

support, classroom interactions, and concepts related to children's health, well-being, and holistic development.

Process involves purposive selection of participants, administration of semi-structured interviews, verbatim transcription, coding of narratives, and thematic analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify significant experiences and shared meanings.

Output consists of the emergent themes describing the lived experiences of Isabela State University pre-service teachers in advancing inclusive education for holistic child development within health, well-being, and learning, together with evidence-based recommendations for strengthening teacher education curricula, inclusive teaching practices, and field-based learning experiences.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Isabela State University (ISU) pre-service teachers in advancing inclusive education for holistic child development within health, well-being, and learning at Ugad Elementary School, Cabagan. IPA was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret and make meaning of significant educational experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). The study was conducted during the participants' teaching internship at Ugad Elementary School, Cabagan, involving 10–15 pre-service teachers from the College of Teacher Education of Isabela

State University who had direct experience in implementing inclusive teaching practices during field immersion. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed rich experiences in handling diverse learners within inclusive classroom settings. Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide validated by experts in inclusive education, special education, child development, and qualitative research. Individual interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted face-to-face with participants' informed consent and audio-recorded for accuracy before being transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed following the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, including repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, identification of emergent themes, clustering of related themes, and cross-case analysis to uncover the shared meanings of participants' lived experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability through member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process. Ethical principles were strictly observed by securing institutional approval, obtaining voluntary informed consent, ensuring participants' right to withdraw at any stage of the study, protecting anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, and maintaining the confidentiality and secure storage of all research data.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the participants' narratives using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) generated four superordinate themes that describe the lived experiences of Isabela State University pre-service teachers in advancing inclusive education for holistic child development within health, well-being, and learning at Ugad Elementary School, Cabagan. The findings illustrate how authentic classroom experiences shaped their inclusive pedagogical competencies, professional identity, empathy, and commitment to supporting diverse learners.

Theme 1: Transforming Inclusive Education Theory into Meaningful Classroom Practice

Participants described their field immersion as a transformative experience that enabled them to translate inclusive education theories learned in university into authentic classroom practice. Through lesson implementation, differentiated instruction, classroom observation, and learner interaction, they gained practical knowledge in addressing diverse learning needs while creating supportive and engaging learning environments. They emphasized that inclusive teaching requires flexibility, patience, creativity, and continuous reflection rather than simply applying instructional techniques.

One participant shared:

"What I learned in our university became more meaningful when I experienced teaching children with different learning needs in the actual classroom."

Another participant explained:

"Inclusive education is not only about accepting learners but also about adjusting my teaching so every child can participate and succeed."

These narratives demonstrate that experiential learning strengthens pre-service teachers' confidence and bridges the gap between educational theory and classroom practice.

Theme 2: Nurturing Holistic Child Development Through Inclusive Teaching

Participants recognized that effective inclusive education extends beyond academic instruction by supporting children's physical, emotional, social, psychological, and cognitive development. They learned to value each learner's uniqueness, promote positive classroom relationships, encourage participation, and provide emotional support that contributed to learners' health, well-being, and self-confidence. Many participants acknowledged that understanding children's individual needs enabled them to become more compassionate and responsive educators.

One participant stated:

"I realized that children learn better when they feel accepted, safe, and respected inside the classroom."

Another participant reflected:

"Teaching is not only about lessons; it is also about helping children grow emotionally, socially, and personally."

These experiences indicate that holistic child development is an essential component of inclusive education and contributes

significantly to learners' overall well-being and educational success.

Theme 3: Navigating Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Although participants valued inclusive education, they encountered several challenges during their teaching internship. These included managing diverse learning abilities, addressing behavioral concerns, limited instructional materials, large class sizes, insufficient specialized resources, and balancing individual learner support with whole-class instruction. Participants initially experienced uncertainty and anxiety; however, guidance from mentor teachers, collaboration with classmates, and reflective teaching practices enabled them to gradually develop confidence and adaptive instructional strategies.

One participant remarked:

"At first, I was nervous because every learner had different needs, but my mentor teacher helped me become more confident."

Another participant shared:

"Limited resources challenged us, but we learned to become creative and flexible in delivering inclusive lessons."

These findings highlight the importance of mentorship, institutional support, and continuous professional learning in strengthening pre-service teachers' readiness for inclusive classrooms.

Theme 4: Developing Professional Identity as Future Inclusive Educators

Participants described their field experiences as instrumental in shaping their professional

identity and commitment to becoming inclusive educators. They expressed a stronger sense of responsibility, empathy, ethical awareness, and dedication to promoting equitable learning opportunities for all children. Many participants reported that their experiences transformed their perspectives on teaching by emphasizing service, compassion, respect for diversity, and lifelong professional growth. They viewed inclusive education as a professional commitment that extends beyond the classroom and contributes to building healthier, more equitable, and learner-centered communities.

One participant reflected:

"This experience made me realize that becoming a teacher means believing that every child deserves quality education regardless of their abilities."

Another participant stated:

"Inclusive education has become part of my identity because I want every learner to feel valued, respected, and capable of succeeding."

These narratives demonstrate that authentic teaching experiences cultivate future educators who are committed to advancing inclusive education and promoting holistic child development through health, well-being, and meaningful learning.

Discussion

The findings reveal that field immersion at Ugad Elementary School provided Isabela State University pre-service teachers with meaningful opportunities to bridge theory and practice in inclusive education. Authentic

classroom experiences strengthened their understanding of differentiated instruction, learner diversity, holistic child development, and the interconnected roles of health, well-being, and learning in children's educational success. Although participants encountered challenges related to instructional resources, learner diversity, and classroom management, these experiences enhanced their resilience, reflective practice, and professional growth. Overall, the study demonstrates that experiential learning serves as a powerful mechanism for preparing future teachers who are competent, compassionate, and committed to creating inclusive learning environments that foster the holistic development and well-being of every child.

The findings demonstrate that the field immersion experiences of Isabela State University pre-service teachers significantly contributed to bridging theoretical knowledge and authentic classroom practice in inclusive education. Participants described how inclusive teaching evolved from being a theoretical concept into a meaningful professional commitment centered on promoting holistic child development through health, well-being, and learning. Consistent with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (2015), authentic classroom experiences enabled participants to transform academic knowledge into practical teaching competencies through observation, reflection, and active engagement with diverse learners. Similarly, the findings support Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978), highlighting that collaboration with mentor teachers, learners, and school communities facilitated the development of inclusive pedagogical

practices and professional growth. The participants also recognized that learners' emotional well-being, physical health, social relationships, and psychological safety are closely connected to academic achievement, reinforcing the holistic nature of inclusive education. Although challenges such as limited instructional resources, learner diversity, and classroom management were encountered, these experiences strengthened participants' adaptability, resilience, empathy, and confidence. Overall, the findings affirm that meaningful field experiences are indispensable in preparing future educators capable of implementing inclusive education while supporting children's overall health, well-being, and lifelong development.

Educational Implications

The findings provide significant implications for teacher education institutions, schools, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers. Teacher education programs should further strengthen coursework and field experiences by integrating inclusive pedagogy, child development, health promotion, mental well-being, differentiated instruction, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles throughout the curriculum. Greater collaboration between universities and partner schools should be encouraged to provide pre-service teachers with sustained exposure to diverse learners and authentic inclusive classroom environments. Faculty members and mentor teachers should continue implementing reflective supervision, coaching, and collaborative professional learning that enhance pre-service teachers' confidence and instructional competence. Schools should

likewise promote inclusive cultures that prioritize learners' physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being while ensuring equitable participation in learning. These initiatives will contribute to preparing competent, compassionate, and reflective educators capable of advancing inclusive education and supporting holistic child development.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Isabela State University pre-service teachers in advancing inclusive education for holistic child development within health, well-being, and learning at Ugad Elementary School, Cabagan. The findings revealed that field immersion served as a transformative learning experience, enabling pre-service teachers to bridge theoretical knowledge and authentic classroom practice in inclusive education. Through direct engagement with diverse learners, participants developed a deeper understanding of differentiated instruction, learner-centered pedagogy, collaboration, and reflective teaching while recognizing that every child possesses unique strengths, needs, and potentials that require equitable educational support.

The study further demonstrated that inclusive education extends beyond academic achievement by promoting children's physical health, emotional well-being, social inclusion, psychological safety, and overall holistic development. Participants emphasized that creating supportive, respectful, and nurturing learning environments positively influenced learners' confidence, participation, and educational

engagement. Although they encountered challenges such as limited instructional resources, diverse learner needs, classroom management concerns, and adapting instructional strategies, these experiences strengthened their resilience, empathy, adaptability, and professional confidence as future educators.

Overall, the study concludes that authentic teaching experiences play a vital role in preparing competent, compassionate, and reflective teachers capable of implementing inclusive educational practices that promote holistic child development. By integrating inclusive pedagogy, experiential learning, health promotion, and learner well-being into teacher education, higher education institutions can prepare future educators who are committed to fostering equitable, healthy, and inclusive learning environments for every child.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Isabela State University** should further strengthen its teacher education curriculum by integrating inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, child development, mental health, and learner well-being across professional education courses.
2. **Teacher educators and mentor teachers** should continue providing structured mentoring, reflective coaching, classroom observations, and collaborative feedback to

enhance pre-service teachers' competence and confidence in implementing inclusive teaching practices.

3. **Partner schools**, including Ugad Elementary School, should strengthen collaborative partnerships with higher education institutions by providing diverse and authentic classroom experiences that expose pre-service teachers to inclusive educational practices and learner diversity.
4. **School administrators and educational policymakers** should provide adequate instructional resources, assistive technologies, learning materials, and professional development opportunities that support the effective implementation of inclusive education and holistic child development programs.
5. **Pre-service teachers** should continuously engage in reflective practice, lifelong professional learning, collaboration with multidisciplinary teams, and evidence-based instructional innovation to improve their ability to address learners' diverse educational, health, and well-being needs.
6. **Future researchers** are encouraged to conduct comparative, mixed-methods, or longitudinal studies involving multiple teacher education institutions and partner schools to further examine the long-term effects of inclusive teacher preparation on

teaching effectiveness, learner outcomes, and holistic child development.

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