

**Designing an inclusive teaching guide for public elementary schools:
Teachers' insights from Mandaue City**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs at Leonard Wood Elementary School, North District, Division of Mandaue City, during School Year 2025–2026. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, it explored teachers' instructional practices, classroom management, assessment approaches, challenges, collaboration, and professional development needs, with the goal of developing a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide. Data were collected from ten purposively selected teachers through semi-structured online interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's framework. Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Findings showed that teachers view inclusive education as both meaningful and challenging. Despite strong commitment, they faced issues such as large class sizes, limited resources, diverse learner needs, time constraints, and insufficient specialized training. Teachers responded through differentiated instruction, flexible classroom management, adapted assessments, and collaboration with parents, colleagues, and school administrators. Continuous, practical, and context-based professional development was emphasized. Based on the findings, a Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide intended for Leonard Wood Elementary School was developed to support classroom practice. The study underscores the need for sustained institutional support, continuous teacher capacity-building, and contextually relevant resources to strengthen inclusive education.

Keywords: Special Education, inclusive education, teachers lived experiences, learners with special needs, qualitative phenomenological study, Mandaue City.

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INTRODUCTION

Every child deserves equal opportunities to learn and grow regardless of ability, background, or personal circumstance. In public elementary schools, the implementation of inclusive education has revealed both the challenges and the rewards of creating learning environments that are responsive to diverse learners. Although many teachers remain committed to addressing the varied needs of their students, they often do so without sufficient

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concrete guidance, practical strategies, or locally relevant resources. This gap between policy and classroom practice has important consequences for the quality of education and for the holistic development of learners with special needs.

Inclusive education has emerged as a global movement that advances equality, diversity, and access to quality education for all students. International frameworks such as UNESCO's Education for All guidelines (2020) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) emphasize that education is a fundamental human right and that schools must nurture the potential of every learner. In countries such as Finland and Canada, inclusive practices have been institutionalized through national policies that promote tailored support, collaboration among teachers, and the integration of students with special needs into mainstream classrooms. These examples demonstrate that inclusion is not only a policy requirement but also a moral and social responsibility that seeks to reduce educational inequities.

In the Philippine context, inclusive education is likewise legally mandated. Article XIV, Section 1 of the 1987 Constitution guarantees every citizen's right to quality education. This commitment is reinforced by Republic Act No. 7277, or the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, Republic Act No. 10533, or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, and DepEd Orders No. 72, s. 2009, and No. 44, s. 2021, which outline the provision of educational programs and services for learners with disabilities in the K to 12 system. Despite these legislative frameworks, public elementary schools, particularly in Mandaue City, continue to experience difficulties in implementing inclusive education in a consistent and effective manner. Teachers are often required to manage classrooms composed of students with learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), visual or hearing impairments, and mild intellectual disabilities. While many teachers have attended Special Education (SPED) trainings, they frequently report that such programs are not enough to equip them with the practical skills and deeper knowledge needed for day to day inclusive instruction.

Existing research shows that teachers' limited capacity, the lack of teaching materials, and inadequate access to continuous professional development constrain their ability to translate inclusive education policies into meaningful classroom practice (Buabeng & Ntow, 2021; Dapudong, 2019). Although previous studies have examined general attitudes toward inclusion or focused on policy frameworks, few have captured the lived experiences, challenges, and professional development needs of public elementary school teachers in Mandaue City. There is also a notable lack of locally grounded and practical resources that can guide teachers in implementing inclusive strategies suited to their specific classroom realities. This gap underscores the need for research that not only documents these experiences but also transforms them into actionable tools for educators.

In response to this need, the present study seeks to explore the real world experiences of public elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education. By examining their challenges, perceptions, and professional development needs, the research aims to develop a comprehensive Inclusive Education Guide that will serve as a professional development tool offering evidence based strategies, practical insights, and classroom ready approaches to strengthen inclusive practices. In doing so, the study aspires to bridge the gap between policy and practice and to empower teachers to create learning environments that are welcoming, supportive, and responsive to the needs of all learners. It also contributes to the professional growth of teachers and to the academic and social development of students with special needs, affirming that every child is valued, capable, and deserving of the opportunity to reach full potential.

The study is anchored on three interrelated theoretical frameworks, namely Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), and Knowles' Adult

Learning Theory (1980). Together, these frameworks provide a holistic foundation for understanding how learning, social interaction, and professional growth shape the practice of inclusive education in public elementary schools. Collectively, they explain how learners with special needs develop cognitively and socially, how teachers and peers influence one another, and how educators continually strengthen the competencies needed to respond effectively to diverse learners.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory asserts that learning is a socially mediated process shaped by interaction, culture, and language. Central to this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what a learner can accomplish independently and what can be achieved with the support of a more competent individual such as a teacher or peer. In inclusive education, this concept provides a framework for customized instruction and scaffolding. Teachers adjust their instructional approaches according to each learner's developmental stage and provide the support needed as learners move toward greater independence. This perspective reinforces the belief that all children can learn when they are given appropriate assistance, a supportive environment, and encouragement. Vygotsky's theory also emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning, in which students learn through interaction and shared experiences. In inclusive classrooms, this principle supports peer assisted learning, cooperative group work, and social participation, all of which foster acceptance and mutual respect among learners of different abilities. Inclusion, therefore, becomes not merely an educational arrangement but a social community in which diversity is valued as a resource for learning.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) further strengthens this foundation by positing that individuals acquire new behaviors and attitudes through observation, imitation, and modeling. Learning is shaped not only by direct experience but also by observing the actions of others and the consequences of those actions. This theory is highly relevant to inclusive education because teachers and students influence one another's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. In the classroom, teachers serve as powerful models of empathy, patience, and acceptance. Their interactions with learners establish the tone of the classroom and demonstrate how respect and collaboration should be practiced. When students observe their teacher embracing diversity, they are more likely to internalize inclusive values and extend understanding to peers with special needs. Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to influence outcomes, is also central to teachers' professional competence. Teachers with strong self-efficacy are more confident in using differentiated strategies, adapting instructional materials, and managing diverse classrooms effectively. Social Learning Theory therefore highlights the reciprocal nature of inclusion, where teachers model inclusive practices and students learn inclusion through example.

Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (1980), also known as Andragogy, provides the basis for understanding teachers' professional growth and continuing education. Knowles explains that adults learn most effectively when learning is self-directed, grounded in experience, and relevant to their professional and personal lives. In the context of this study, this theory supports the need for tailored and context specific training for teachers working in inclusive classrooms. Professional learning should be rooted in teachers' actual experiences and should address the real challenges they encounter in managing learners with special needs. It should not be prescriptive or generic, but collaborative, reflective, and adaptive, enabling educators to co create knowledge, exchange best practices, and engage in continuous learning communities. Guided by Knowles' principles, the Inclusive Education Guide envisioned in this study is intended to function as a responsive professional learning tool that empowers teachers to design inclusive lessons, use assistive technologies, and strengthen partnerships with parents and specialists. In this way, the study aligns with DepEd's advocacy for lifelong learning and

capacity building among teachers to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education policies.

Taken together, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), and Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (1980) offer a multidimensional lens for understanding and implementing inclusive education. Vygotsky emphasizes that learning is inherently social and highlights the importance of scaffolding, peer interaction, and collaborative learning in classrooms with diverse learners. Bandura underscores the roles of modeling, observational learning, and mutual influence, showing how teachers and students shape each other's learning experiences. Knowles emphasizes teacher growth and professional empowerment, suggesting that educators who themselves are lifelong learners are better prepared to design and implement effective inclusive practices. Together, these frameworks support the study's focus on both learner focused and teacher focused approaches, recognizing that inclusive education depends not only on student support but also on the continuous development and competence of educators.

These theoretical foundations are reinforced by local and international legal and policy frameworks that establish inclusive education as a right and guide its implementation in schools. Republic Act No. 10533, or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, emphasizes that education must be accessible to all learners and encourages schools to adapt teaching strategies to diverse needs. Republic Act No. 11650, s. 2022, otherwise known as "An Act Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education," serves as a principal legal framework for promoting inclusive educational practices in all learning institutions and for ensuring that learners with disabilities receive the support necessary to achieve their full potential. Republic Act No. 9442, the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities (2007), amending RA 7277, further guarantees that learners with disabilities are provided quality education without discrimination and requires schools to implement inclusive strategies. In addition, Department of Education (DepEd) Order No. 32, s. 2017, or the Policy Guidelines on the Implementation of the Inclusive Education Program (IEP), provides the operational framework for implementing inclusive education in public schools. This policy emphasizes that learners with special needs should have equal access to education in regular classrooms supported by adapted instructional strategies, accommodations, and teacher professional development.

DepEd Order 32 connects national policy to classroom practice by guiding teachers in designing inclusive lessons, fostering supportive learning environments, and implementing strategies that address diverse learner needs. At the global level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2008) affirms that inclusive education is a fundamental human right and situates this study within an international commitment to equitable learning opportunities for all children. By integrating these theoretical and legal frameworks, the study underscores the critical role of teachers as both facilitators of learning and advocates of inclusion. The findings are expected to inform school authorities and division officials in developing contextually relevant programs and policies that strengthen inclusive education in public elementary schools in Mandaue City. More specifically, the research seeks to provide a foundation for designing a comprehensive Inclusive Education Guide that is centered on teachers and equips them with the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to respond effectively to learners with diverse abilities.

Situating the study within both local and global commitments, including the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive and equitable quality education, further affirms that inclusion is not only a pedagogical strategy but also a social and moral responsibility. By documenting teachers' lived experiences, this study seeks to bridge theory, policy, and practice, contribute

to a more holistic understanding of inclusive education, and promote classrooms in which every learner is valued, supported, and empowered to reach full potential.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of public elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs in the North District, Division of Mandaue City, during the School Year 2025–2026. By understanding how teachers navigated inclusive classrooms, the study sought to generate meaningful insights that would serve as the foundation for developing a Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide. This guide was envisioned to strengthen teachers' inclusive practices and improve the learning outcomes of students with diverse abilities.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How did public elementary school teachers describe their lived experiences in teaching learners with special needs within inclusive classroom settings?
2. What instructional strategies, classroom management approaches, and assessment practices did teachers employ to address the diverse learning needs of inclusion learners?
3. What challenges and barriers did teachers and school administrators encounter in implementing inclusive education in public elementary schools?
4. How did teachers collaborate with parents, specialists, and school administrators to promote inclusion and support learners with special needs?
5. What professional development needs and forms of support did teachers identify as essential to enhance their competence, confidence, and readiness in managing inclusive classrooms?
6. How could the insights and lived experiences of public elementary school teachers inform the development of a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide that strengthened inclusive practices and enhanced the learning outcomes of learners with special needs in the North District, Division of Mandaue City, during the School Year 2025–2026?
7. Based on the findings of the study, what Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide could be developed to support public elementary teachers in Mandaue City?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs in the North District, Division of Mandaue City, during the School Year 2025–2026. This approach was selected because it is appropriate for capturing the essence of teachers' real life experiences, their perceptions, the challenges they encounter, and the meanings they attach to inclusive teaching practices. Rather than focusing on numerical data or measurable outcomes, the study sought to describe and interpret teachers' insights, reflections, and professional journeys as they work to enhance learning opportunities for children with special needs. Through this qualitative lens, the inquiry foregrounded the voices of teachers, particularly their understanding of inclusion, the ways they adapt instruction, collaborate with colleagues and parents, and respond to the diverse needs of learners. In doing so, the study provided a deeper understanding of how inclusive education policies are translated into classroom practices and established the groundwork for developing a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide for Public Elementary Teachers for the

School Year 2025–2026 in the Division of Mandaue City that is anchored in teachers' authentic experiences and professional realities.

The conceptual flow of the study proceeded from input, to process, to output. The input consisted of several key components that formed the foundation for understanding the implementation of inclusive education in public elementary schools. These included the demographic profiles of participating teachers, particularly their age, teaching position, years of experience, and training background, which were gathered to provide context on the human resources involved in inclusive education. The study also considered teachers' lived experiences and personal narratives in order to capture their reflections, challenges, and strategies in addressing the needs of learners with diverse abilities. In addition, the school context was examined through existing inclusive programs, support systems, and available learning resources so that institutional factors that facilitate or constrain inclusive practices could be understood. Relevant policies and professional development opportunities related to inclusive education were likewise reviewed to identify the structural and systemic support provided to teachers. Collectively, these inputs offered a comprehensive picture of the factors that influence teachers' ability to translate inclusive education policies into effective classroom practices.

The process of the study involved several systematic steps. Permission and coordination were first undertaken by securing approval from the Division Superintendent and the heads of participating public elementary schools in the North District, Mandaue City Division, thereby ensuring observance of ethical considerations and institutional protocols. Data gathering then followed through open-ended qualitative questionnaires distributed via Google Forms, allowing teachers who handle learners with special needs to share their experiences conveniently and comprehensively. After the responses were collected, data organization and analysis were conducted through thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns, categories, and emerging themes, with coding aligned to the research questions. The final stage of the process involved interpreting these themes to understand teachers' lived experiences, the challenges they face, the strategies they employ, and their professional development needs, thereby generating insights into real-life classroom practices and the implementation of inclusive education. The output of the study was the development of a Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide for public elementary teachers designed to translate policy into practical classroom strategies. The guide was intended to strengthen inclusive teaching practices by offering actionable recommendations grounded in the lived experiences of teachers, while also promoting collaboration among teachers, parents, and school administrators.

The narrative description of the study flow further clarifies that the input focused on the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of teachers and school administrators in inclusive education, together with contextual factors influencing inclusive teaching such as training, school programs, support systems, and resources. The process included securing permissions from the Schools Division Superintendent and school heads, conducting in-depth interviews and open-ended online surveys using Google Forms, carrying out thematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of qualitative data, and validating the themes through member checking and peer debriefing. These interconnected stages culminated in the output, which was the Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide. As illustrated in the flow of the study, teachers' lived experiences and perceptions as the input were explored through qualitative processes such as interviews and thematic analysis as the process, and these led directly to the development of a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide as the output.

The study was conducted at Leonard Wood Elementary School, a public elementary school situated in the North District of the Division of Mandaue City. The school operates under the administrative supervision of the City Schools Division of Mandaue City, which is responsible for the governance and oversight of basic education in the city. Leonard Wood Elementary School serves a diverse population of learners, including those with special

educational needs, and implements inclusive education programs in which learners are formally identified and recorded in the Learner Information System under the category “Inclusion Learners.” These programs are intended to provide equitable access to quality education and appropriate learning support services. The implementation of inclusive education in the school is guided by DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009, or the Inclusive Education Program, and the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan. Through these policies, the school continues to strengthen inclusive practices that address the academic and developmental needs of all learners and promote an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

More specifically, the research environment was Leonard Wood Elementary School located in Barangay Jagobiao, Mandaue City, under the North District of the Division of Mandaue City. The school is a public elementary institution implementing inclusive education in accordance with Department of Education policies and national laws. It serves learners from diverse socio economic backgrounds and offers Kindergarten to Grade 6 education. It also accommodates learners with special needs who are formally identified in the Learner Information System as inclusion learners. These learners are mainstreamed in regular classrooms, where teachers implement instructional adaptations, classroom management strategies, and assessment modifications to address diverse learning needs. The school provided an appropriate setting for the study because teachers are directly involved in the day to day implementation of inclusive education. Their experiences in handling inclusion learners, collaborating with parents and school administrators, and responding to classroom challenges offered rich insights into inclusive teaching practices. For this reason, Leonard Wood Elementary School served as a suitable environment for examining teachers lived experiences in inclusive education and for developing a Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide grounded in the realities of classroom practice.

The participants in the study were classroom teachers from Leonard Wood Elementary School who were purposively selected because of their direct involvement in teaching learners with special needs and implementing inclusive education programs in the school. The distribution of participants showed that Leonard Wood Elementary School had 10 classroom teachers participating in the study, for a total of 10 participants representing 100% of the study participants. The complete representation of participants from a single school ensured that the data gathered reflected the authentic and context specific experiences of teachers implementing inclusive education within Leonard Wood Elementary School. Since all respondents were directly involved in handling inclusion learners, their insights provided an in depth and focused understanding of inclusive teaching practices, challenges, and support mechanisms within the school setting. This concentrated distribution strengthened the relevance and credibility of the findings because the perspectives gathered were not diluted by varying school contexts. Consequently, the results served as a strong foundation for developing a Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide that is responsive to the actual needs and realities of teachers at Leonard Wood Elementary School.

The instrument used in this study was a Semi Structured Interview Guide administered via Google Forms. It was designed to explore teachers' experiences, instructional strategies, challenges, collaboration practices, and professional development needs related to implementing inclusive education for students with special needs. The participants consisted of 10 school classroom teachers who were directly involved in teaching and managing learners with special needs in Leonard Wood Elementary School, North District, Division of Mandaue City. Consistent with the qualitative phenomenological design of the study, the instrument sought to capture the lived experiences of teachers and provide an in depth understanding of their perceptions, classroom practices, challenges, and recommendations for professional development. The use of Google Forms as the medium of administration allowed participants

to respond at their own convenience and reflect thoughtfully on their experiences. Responses were collected in an open ended format, thereby generating rich qualitative data for thematic analysis and forming the basis for the development of a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide. The Semi Structured Interview Guide was organized into sections corresponding to the study's six research questions, and participants were prompted to provide detailed responses in order to encourage reflection and capture authentic experiences.

The data gathering procedure began during the preliminary stage after the approval of the research title by the Dean of the College of Education, Cebu Technological University – Main Campus. Following this approval, a formal communication letter was submitted to the Schools Division Superintendent of Mandaue City to request authorization to conduct the study among selected public elementary schools in the North District. Once permission was granted, the researcher coordinated with the participating school heads to seek consent and cooperation in identifying qualified teacher participants. These participants were purposively selected based on their direct experience in teaching learners with special needs and implementing inclusive education practices. Prior to data collection, participants were oriented through a brief online meeting conducted via social media platforms. During this session, the purpose of the study, research procedures, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights were clearly explained. They were assured that all information shared would be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. Participation was voluntary, and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. This process adhered to the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012, R.A. 10173, and the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

During the data gathering stage, the researcher used Google Forms as the primary tool for data collection in order to ensure accessibility. This online format provided participants with a convenient and flexible means of sharing their insights and experiences and accommodated the varying schedules and workloads of public school teachers. The questionnaire, designed in an open ended format, guided participants in describing their experiences, teaching strategies, and challenges encountered in inclusive classrooms. It also enabled them to express their perceptions regarding professional development and the support needed to strengthen inclusive practices. The online format further allowed respondents to reflect thoughtfully on their answers, helping ensure that their responses captured authentic experiences and perspectives on inclusive education.

During the post gathering stage, once the responses were collected, the researcher reviewed, organized, and coded the qualitative data to identify recurring themes and patterns. The data were then subjected to thematic analysis, which emphasizes meaning making and the discovery of underlying insights from participants' narratives. After the completion of data collection and analysis, a letter of gratitude was sent to the Schools Division Superintendent and the school heads of the participating schools to acknowledge their support and collaboration in the successful conduct of the research.

The step by step flow of data gathering followed a systematic procedure to ensure rigor and adherence to ethical standards. It began with the approval of the research title by the Dean of the College of Education, Cebu Technological University – Main Campus, which served as the formal starting point of the study. After this approval was secured, the researcher submitted a request for permission to the Schools Division Superintendent of Mandaue City to conduct the study in selected public elementary schools in the North District. Once authorization was granted, the researcher coordinated with school heads to obtain their cooperation and assistance in identifying qualified teacher participants. To prepare the participants, an orientation was conducted through an online meeting where the purpose of the study, research procedures, and ethical safeguards were explained, thereby ensuring that participants understood their rights and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Following this orientation, the research

instrument, specifically an open ended questionnaire, was distributed via Google Forms to provide accessibility and convenience, particularly in light of the demanding schedules of public school teachers. Data collection was carried out digitally with strict adherence to confidentiality measures and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, thereby protecting the integrity of participants' responses. Once responses were gathered, the researcher organized and coded the data and applied thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and insights related to inclusive education practices. Finally, after the completion of data collection and analysis, letters of appreciation were issued to the Schools Division Superintendent and the participating school heads to formally acknowledge their support and collaboration in the successful conduct of the study.

In interpreting the identified themes, the researchers used an interpretive guide based on the frequency of occurrence of themes across participants' responses. A theme was considered highly evident if it appeared in more than 75% of the participants' responses, indicating a dominant and commonly shared experience among respondents. A theme was classified as moderately evident if it appeared in approximately 50% to 75% of the responses, reflecting a frequently observed experience or perception. A theme was considered minimally evident if it appeared in less than 50% of the participants' responses, suggesting a unique or context specific insight. This interpretive guide ensured that the themes were systematically categorized according to their prevalence while preserving the richness of participants' responses. Overall, the process ensured that the voices of teachers and school heads were authentically captured, thereby providing a profound understanding of their lived experiences, instructional practices, challenges, and recommendations for strengthening inclusive education in public elementary schools within the North District, Division of Mandaue City.

To ensure the accuracy, credibility, and reliability of the findings, the researcher employed the criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through member checking by sharing summarized interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the data. Transferability was addressed by providing thick, descriptive narratives to allow readers to contextualize the findings and apply them to similar educational settings. Dependability was supported through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting the research process, coding decisions, and thematic development. Confirmability was ensured by minimizing personal bias through reflective journaling and by basing interpretations solely on participants' actual responses. These strategies strengthened the study's overall validity and ensured that the conclusions drawn accurately represented the lived experiences and perspectives of teachers and administrators implementing inclusive education.

The study also strictly adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Before the start of data collection, the researcher sought formal approval from the Schools Division Superintendent of Mandaue City and the respective school heads of the participating institutions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and their rights as participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all participant information and ensuring that the data collected were used solely for academic purposes. All digital responses were stored securely and made accessible only to the researcher. The study complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, Republic Act No. 10173, and the ethical research policies of Cebu Technological University – Main Campus.

For clarity and consistency in the conduct and interpretation of the study, key terms were operationally defined. Assessment Adaptations referred to the modifications or

adjustments made in evaluating learners with special needs, including alternative formats, extended time, simplified instructions, or differentiated tasks to ensure fair and accurate assessment of learner progress. Challenges and Barriers referred to the factors that hinder the successful implementation of inclusive education, including inadequate training, scarcity of resources, oversized classes, lack of instructional materials, limited administrative support, and insufficient specialized services. Classroom Management referred to the strategies teachers use to create a safe, orderly, and supportive learning environment in an inclusive classroom, including behavior management, organization of physical space, routines, and rules tailored to diverse learners. Collaboration Practices referred to the coordinated efforts among teachers, parents, school administrators, and specialists to support the academic and behavioral needs of learners with special needs, ensuring shared decision making and continuous support. Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide referred to the proposed output of the study developed based on the findings of the research. It is a structured guide that contains context specific strategies, instructional approaches, assessment adaptations, and collaboration practices designed to support teachers and school heads in effectively implementing inclusive education in public elementary schools.

Inclusive Education referred to a transformative approach to teaching and learning that ensures equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of aptitude, background, gender, or socioeconomic status, and promotes diversity, participation, and respect within the classroom. Instructional Strategies referred to the differentiated teaching approaches employed by teachers to meet the varied learning needs of students in an inclusive classroom, with examples including scaffolding, multisensory activities, cooperative learning, and individualized instruction. Learners with Special Needs (LSENs) referred to learners who require additional academic, behavioral, or developmental support due to physical, intellectual, sensory, or behavioral challenges. In this study, they referred specifically to students formally tagged as "Inclusion Learners" in the Learner Information System. Level of Implementation referred to the degree to which inclusive education policies, practices, and principles are applied in the school setting, measuring the consistency, fidelity, and effectiveness of inclusive programs across classrooms. Phenomenological Study referred to a qualitative research design used to explore and interpret participants lived experiences. In this study, the phenomenological approach sought to understand teachers' personal experiences, perceptions, and meanings related to inclusive education. Progressive Inclusion Framework referred to the proposed output developed by the researchers based on the study's findings, and it outlines actionable recommendations, interventions, and strategies aimed at improving inclusive education implementation in public elementary schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion of this study are grounded in qualitative data gathered from a purposively selected group of public elementary school teachers in the North District of the Division of Mandaue City. The participants, who were directly involved in inclusive classroom settings, provided in depth responses through a semi structured interview guide designed to capture their lived experiences, instructional practices, challenges, collaborative efforts, professional development needs, and recommendations for improving inclusive education. Using a thematic analysis approach, the data were systematically examined to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes aligned with the objectives of the study. The discussion that follows is firmly anchored in the empirical data gathered, and all interpretations are directly derived from the participants' responses in relation to the research questions. The analytical process ensured that the findings reflect authentic classroom realities and contribute to the development of a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide.

The analysis of the teachers' lived experiences in inclusive education reveals a complex interplay between professional commitment and practical challenges. Teachers consistently described inclusive education as both meaningful and demanding, requiring continuous adjustment, patience, and creativity. Their experiences demonstrate that inclusion extends beyond instructional strategies and reflects a deep commitment to fairness, compassion, and equitable access to learning. Participants expressed that their empathy has significantly increased as a result of working with learners with special needs, with one teacher stating, "My empathy has grown as a result of working with students who have special needs, and I've been reminded that all children can learn and thrive if they are given the correct support and chances," while another emphasized that "Accepting students with impairments is difficult but rewarding." These narratives illustrate how teachers navigate the dual realities of challenge and fulfillment in inclusive settings. Teachers reported implementing strategies such as simplifying tasks, providing clear instructions, allocating additional time, and using visual aids and guided practice to support learner understanding. These practices align with the principles of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes scaffolded learning, as well as the Universal Design for Learning framework that promotes multiple means of representation and engagement. The consistent use of positive reinforcement further reflects the influence of Behaviorism, highlighting how encouragement strengthens learner participation. Additionally, the emotional dimensions of teaching described by participants resonate with Humanistic Theory, emphasizing empathy and acceptance as central to effective learning environments. These findings confirm that inclusive education is most effective when pedagogical flexibility is combined with emotional responsiveness, enabling learners with special needs to experience both academic growth and a sense of belonging.

The findings further indicate that teachers employ a wide range of instructional strategies, classroom management approaches, and assessment practices to address learner diversity. Instructional practices are characterized by differentiated instruction, scaffolded learning, and the use of visual, hands on, and individualized approaches tailored to learners' needs. Teachers emphasized the importance of modifying lesson complexity, as reflected in the statement, "I changed the complexity of learning instruction and assessment to basic," demonstrating intentional adaptation to learners' readiness levels. Classroom management practices focus on establishing clear routines, consistent rules, and supportive environments that promote respect and collaboration. Teachers strategically group learners to facilitate peer support while providing additional guidance to those who require it, ensuring that all learners remain engaged and included. Assessment practices are similarly flexible, incorporating both formal and informal methods such as observations, checklists, and individualized evaluations. Participants described modifying assessments by simplifying instructions, breaking tasks into manageable components, allowing extended time, and providing alternative response formats such as oral or visual outputs. These practices are consistent with the principles of differentiated instruction and inclusive assessment, as emphasized by Tomlinson and supported by research on inclusive pedagogy. The integration of these strategies demonstrates that teachers are actively implementing learner centered approaches that promote equitable access to education, although they also highlight the increased demands placed on teachers in planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Despite these adaptive practices, the findings reveal significant challenges and barriers in the implementation of inclusive education. Teachers identified large class sizes, diverse learning needs, limited instructional resources, time constraints, and behavioral or emotional concerns as major obstacles to effective inclusion. One participant noted that "Individual help may be challenging due to the large class size and variety of student requirements," while another emphasized the difficulty of providing sufficient attention to each learner due to

varying learning speeds and limited materials. These challenges underscore the structural and systemic constraints that affect inclusive teaching practices. Although support from the Department of Education through policies such as Republic Act 10533 and Republic Act 11650 provides a framework for inclusive education, teachers reported that practical implementation remains difficult in resource constrained environments. Nevertheless, teachers actively employ coping strategies such as differentiated instruction, peer support, group work, and one on one guidance, demonstrating resilience and adaptability. These findings are consistent with existing literature, including studies by Florian and Black Hawkins, Loreman, and Ainscow, which highlight that inclusive education requires both teacher initiative and systemic support. The persistence of these challenges indicates the need for enhanced resource allocation, reduced class sizes, and more comprehensive institutional support to ensure the sustainability of inclusive practices.

Collaboration with stakeholders emerged as a critical factor in supporting inclusive education. Teachers emphasized the importance of maintaining regular communication with parents, working closely with specialists, and seeking guidance from school administrators. Participants described practices such as providing weekly updates to parents, maintaining communication notebooks, and consulting SPED specialists to ensure that instructional strategies are appropriate for learners' needs. One teacher reported, "I work with parents by discussing their child's needs and progress on a regular basis," highlighting the role of continuous dialogue in monitoring learner development. Collaboration with specialists allows teachers to design modified instructional materials and interventions, while administrative support provides access to resources and training opportunities. These collaborative practices align with Epstein's School-Family Partnership Theory, which emphasizes the importance of school family partnerships in enhancing learner outcomes, as well as the collaborative frameworks proposed by Friend and Cook. The findings demonstrate that inclusive education is not solely the responsibility of individual teachers but requires coordinated efforts among all stakeholders to effectively address learner diversity and improve educational outcomes.

The analysis also highlights the significant professional development needs of teachers in inclusive classrooms. Participants consistently emphasized the need for training in differentiated instruction, behavior management, assistive technologies, and disability specific interventions. Teachers expressed that practical, hands on training, workshops, and collaborative learning opportunities are essential for improving their competence and confidence in handling diverse learners. One participant stated that professional development should focus on "useful tactics, practical experience, and teamwork," indicating a preference for applied learning approaches. Teachers reported actively engaging in webinars, seminars, and collaboration with colleagues to stay updated with inclusive practices, reflecting a strong commitment to continuous professional growth. These findings are supported by research from Florian and Black Hawkins, Tomlinson, and Darling Hammond, which emphasizes that sustained and collaborative professional development enhances teachers' instructional effectiveness. Philippine based studies further confirm that teachers who participate in professional learning communities demonstrate increased confidence and improved implementation of inclusive strategies. The identified professional development needs highlight the importance of institutionalizing continuous training programs that are responsive to the realities of inclusive classrooms.

Finally, the findings provide a strong empirical basis for the development of an Inclusive Education Guide. Teachers recommended the establishment of a supportive school culture, provision of adequate learning materials and assistive tools, strengthening of stakeholder collaboration, and continuous professional development as essential components of effective inclusive education. Participants emphasized that practical classroom strategies, including lesson adaptation, classroom management techniques, and assessment modifications,

should be clearly outlined in the guide to support teachers in real classroom settings. One teacher noted that their insights could “help identify common challenges and effective strategies for teaching learners with special needs,” underscoring the value of practitioner based knowledge in guide development. These recommendations are consistent with global and local research, including studies by Florian and Black Hawkins, Ainscow, and UNESCO, which emphasize that successful inclusive education depends on well-prepared teachers, adequate resources, and collaborative support systems. The integration of these findings into a structured guide ensures that the proposed output is grounded in actual classroom experiences and aligned with best practices in inclusive education.

In synthesis, the results of this study demonstrate that inclusive education in public elementary schools is characterized by a strong commitment among teachers to support learners with diverse needs, despite significant challenges related to resources, class size, and instructional demands. Teachers employ a range of adaptive strategies in instruction, classroom management, and assessment, reflecting both theoretical alignment and practical innovation. Collaboration with stakeholders and continuous professional development further enhance the effectiveness of inclusive practices. However, persistent systemic barriers highlight the need for strengthened institutional support and targeted interventions. The findings directly address the objectives of the study by providing a comprehensive understanding of teachers’ experiences, strategies, challenges, and needs, and they contribute to the field by offering empirically grounded insights for the development of a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide. These results provide a strong foundation for the subsequent section of the manuscript, which will focus on the design and validation of the proposed guide, ensuring that it is both theoretically informed and practically relevant to the realities of inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of inclusive education for learners with special needs at Leonard Wood Elementary School, North District, Division of Mandaue City, during the School Year 2025–2026 through a qualitative phenomenological approach that captured teachers’ lived experiences, instructional practices, challenges, collaboration efforts, and professional development needs. Using semi-structured interviews administered through Google Forms with teachers directly handling inclusion learners, the study generated findings that served as the basis for the development of a Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide. The results show that teachers perceive inclusive education as both meaningful and demanding. They derive fulfillment from supporting learners with diverse needs, yet they continually face challenges related to large class sizes, limited instructional resources, time constraints, inconsistent collaboration, and inadequate specialized training. These conditions reveal that while inclusive education is embraced in principle, its success in practice depends greatly on how well policies are translated into concrete, classroom-based strategies.

The findings further demonstrate that teachers remain committed and adaptive despite these constraints. They consistently employ learner-centered practices such as differentiated instruction, simplified tasks, visual aids, positive reinforcement, flexible classroom management, and adapted assessment strategies in order to support learner participation, achievement, and equity. These efforts indicate that inclusive education is not only possible but also productive when teachers are equipped with practical methods and guided by a strong sense of responsibility toward learners with special needs. The study also affirms that collaboration with parents, school administrators, colleagues, and specialists plays a significant role in strengthening inclusive practices through open communication, shared monitoring of learner progress, and coordinated support. At the same time, the persistence of limited

resources and inconsistent collaboration suggests that teacher initiative alone is not sufficient and must be reinforced by broader institutional and community support.

Taken together, the findings lead to the conclusion that the effective implementation of inclusive education at Leonard Wood Elementary School largely depends on the successful conversion of legal and policy mandates into responsive classroom practices that address the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of learners. Teachers' lived experiences reflect strong professional commitment, but they also point to the continuing need for context-specific professional development, accessible instructional resources, and stronger collaborative structures. The study therefore affirms that inclusive education in public elementary schools is teacher-driven, resource-dependent, and highly reliant on sustained support systems. In this regard, a contextualized Inclusive Education Guide grounded in teachers' lived experiences is essential for bridging the gap between policy and practice and for strengthening inclusive education in public elementary schools.

In response to these findings, the study underscores the value of a Contextualized Inclusive Education Guide that is firmly grounded in teachers' lived experiences and aligned with the theoretical framework of the research, particularly its emphasis on translating inclusive education policies into effective classroom practices. Guided by the principles of differentiated instruction, social constructivism, and inclusive pedagogy, the guide addresses critical areas such as planning and curriculum adaptation, inclusive teaching strategies, classroom management and support, parent and community engagement, and policy and school support. In the area of planning and curriculum adaptation, the guide responds to teachers' difficulty in modifying lessons for learners with diverse needs by promoting differentiated instruction and the development and implementation of Individual Learning Monitoring Plans (ILMPs) and Learning Support Plans (LSPs). Through tiered assignments, contextualized learning materials, and individualized learning goals prepared by teachers, school heads, and master teachers using curriculum guides, learning materials, and ILMP's /LSP's templates on a quarterly basis, lessons are expected to become more responsive to diverse learners, with learner progress and teacher lesson plans serving as bases for monitoring.

In the area of inclusive teaching strategies, the guide addresses teachers' limited knowledge of inclusive teaching approaches by encouraging the use of collaborative learning, flexible teaching methods, visuals, hands-on activities, and peer assisted supports. Through weekly group activities, peer tutoring, multimedia lessons, and hands-on activities involving teachers and learners and supported by multimedia materials, manipulatives, and peer assisted supports, the guide aims to increase learner participation and engagement, as reflected in classroom observation and participation records. In relation to classroom management and support, the guide recognizes the behavioral and emotional challenges experienced by learners with special needs and proposes the establishment of positive behavioral support and emotional support strategies. These include daily implementation of reward systems, safe spaces, empathy activities, and progress monitoring by teachers, guidance counselors, and school heads using behavior charts, monitoring forms, and journals, with the expected outcome of improved learner behavior and classroom environment measured through behavior monitoring and feedback.

The guide also emphasizes the importance of parent and community engagement in response to limited parent involvement and community support. It recommends maintaining regular communication and encouraging parental involvement through monthly parent-teacher conferences, meetings, communication logs, and community linkages, with teachers, parents, school heads, and community partners working together using communication forms and meeting materials. These efforts are expected to increase parent participation and support for learners, as evidenced by attendance and communication records. Finally, in addressing the lack of resources and administrative support for inclusive education, the guide promotes

stronger policy and school support through the provision of resources, training, and the cultivation of an inclusive school culture. Through annual / semestral provision of teaching materials, conduct of teacher training, and organization of inclusive school programs by school heads, teachers, and the Division Office using teaching materials, training modules, and assistive devices, the guide seeks to improve the implementation of inclusive education programs, as reflected in program evaluation and reports.

Overall, the study concludes that inclusive education can be strengthened when teachers' lived experiences are used as the foundation for practical, school-based interventions. The proposed guide therefore serves not merely as a recommendation, but as a concrete response to the issues, needs, and aspirations identified by teachers in actual classroom settings. By integrating professional development, instructional adaptation, collaborative engagement, behavioral support, and institutional commitment, the guide offers a coherent and actionable pathway for improving inclusive education in public elementary schools. In this way, the study contributes to the ongoing effort to ensure that inclusive education becomes a consistent and meaningful reality for learners with special needs, while also reinforcing the vital role of teachers as key agents in fostering equitable, supportive, and responsive learning environments.

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