



Lived Experiences of Filipino Inclusion Teachers in Dubai Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Filipino inclusion teachers based in Dubai; United Arab Emirates faced numerous challenges during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This study shed light on the lived experiences of eight Filipino inclusion teachers through the lens of Kolb's experiential learning theory. Analysis of interview transcripts using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological inquiry revealed that the teachers' challenges come from their caseload, the exceptionality characteristics of students, physical distance, and adjustment of parents during the pandemic. With the demands coming from these challenges, they managed the learning environment through intensified collaboration with parents and curriculum adjustments. It is hoped that the study results will be utilized in the design of teacher education programs, preparing pre-service teachers and novice teachers for work in schools abroad. In addition, the focus on the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic provides impetus for the creation of frameworks on how provision of educational services could be pandemic-ready. More importantly, the teachers' experiences need to be addressed especially in the areas of mental health and educational technologies. More studies are recommended to capture other aspects of inclusion teachers' experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; inclusion teacher; inclusive education; transcendental phenomenological inquiry; experiential learning theory

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [1] claimed that providing a quality education for all lies at the core of Education 2030 Agenda. The push by the United Nations of inclusion education (IE), beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which championed everyone's right to education, has changed the landscape of learning and teaching. IE has allowed students to attend classes without boundaries or restrictions based on their age, gender orientation, religion, nationality, and, most importantly, physical, and mental abilities. It has made learners with special educational needs feel more welcomed and valued [2].

The implementation of IE came with many challenges. For instance, teachers must learn to teach in inclusionary settings regardless of the subject that they teach. Delivery of instruction and assessment must be differentiated for every learner, with provisions for accommodation and modifications that support their learning. According to the American University [3], inclusion teachers must collaborate in designing a curriculum that addresses the needs of all types of learners which includes planning for supplemental learning materials such as visuals, manipulatives, and technology texts.

Related to this, Mpu and Adu [4] found out that insufficient training and lack of knowledge among educators are among the challenges encountered in the implementation of IE. Likewise, in terms of obstacles, Miller [5] revealed that perception of inclusion, lack of regular planning or collaboration time, and limited support were what teachers faced when implementing IE practices. Another determinant in the effective implementation of IE relates to the attitude and efficacy of teachers. Sharma et al. [6] revealed that teaching efficacy was the strongest predictor in the use of inclusion practices.

Educational institutions take these challenges as a serious undertaking [7]. Preparation of teachers for IE needs to undergo continuous improvement to develop the necessary skills of teachers who teach in inclusion classrooms. Although a pre-service teacher is expected to have high efficacy as they are trained with skills, it is also the role of teacher education institutions to embrace best practices to maximize learning of students. The emotional and intellectual preparedness of pre-service teachers must be supported and strengthened through understanding the lived experiences of practicing teachers.

With many Filipino teachers being employed abroad, there is interest about their adaptation in a foreign land -- i.e., lessons which may help young teachers who will go on the same career path. Reyes et al. [8] claimed that Filipino teachers have effective coping mechanisms to adjust to their new workplaces. Since the teacher is the key facilitator of learning, it is essential to learn about his/her struggles and challenges, strategies in delivering safe and effective learning environment for learners with exceptionalities or disabilities. More so when a health pandemic such as COVID-19 strikes.

Davis [9] concluded that educators in inclusion education have been struggling since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, inclusion teachers learned to engage in virtual learning, interact with the professional community, and engage in meaningful activities to manage anxiety because of the

pandemic-related suspension of school-related activities [10]. Looking in-depth at the adaptations made by practicing teachers was deemed important because similar difficulties that novice inclusion teachers face may have an impact on their professional, emotional, and personal development. These adaptations that resulted through experiences as inclusion teachers during the pandemic may be analyzed through the lens of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory [11]. As posited in this theory, knowledge is the result of understanding and transforming experiences [12]. This emphasizes how experiences, including cognition, environmental factors, and emotions, influence the learning process.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants of this study were eight Filipino inclusion teachers who were employed by different schools in Dubai, United Arab Emirates and have been teaching from three to eight years. Through the process of purposive sampling, they were chosen based on the depth of experience in the conduct of teaching in inclusive education classes. Table 1 provides the distribution of the interview participants.

Table 1: Distribution of the interview participants

Participant	Grade Level(s) Taught	Experience as Inclusion Teacher	Interview Platform	Duration of Interview
A	Grade 3	4 years	Zoom	45 minutes
B	Grade 4	3 years	Zoom	35 minutes
C	Grade 2	3 years	Zoom	40 minutes
D	Grade 2	3 years	Zoom	35 minutes
E	Grade 1	8 years	Zoom	37 minutes
F	Grade 3	8 years	Zoom	30 minutes
G	Grades 3 to 5	7 years	Zoom	45 minutes
H	Grades 3 to 6	3 years	Zoom	43 minutes

Most of the participants were female. This is similar to the findings of Palupi et al. [13] which revealed higher rate of participation by women in inclusive education. In terms of years of teaching experience, four participants

have three years, two participants have eight, and one has four.

2.2 Data Collection

In the attempt to understand the lived experiences of inclusion teachers in Dubai during the pandemic, the following questions were asked:

- What were the challenges encountered by Filipino teachers of inclusion classes in Dubai during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did the Filipino teachers manage the learning environment of inclusion classes in Dubai during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Through a semi-structured interview guide, the participants were interviewed separately online through Zoom meetings. Prior to the interviews, the questions in the interview guide underwent face validation and content validation. All throughout the interview process, appropriate ethical considerations were observed such as using gender-sensitive words, clearly communicating the objective and methodology of the study, seeking permission to record the interview, and assuring the participants that responses will be presented anonymously. As shown in Table 1 above, the length of the online interview ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

2.3 The Analysis of Data

Utilizing Moustakas' [14] transcendental phenomenological inquiry process, analysis of the texts transcribed from the interviews involved the following three steps: textural description, structural description, and eidetic insight.

Textural Description. This step focused on the description of the experiences in teaching inclusion classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, written from the brief verbatim transcripts generated from the interviews. Specific quotes were extracted and examined according to the detailed insights and meaning of the experiences.

Structural Description. The background or underlying circumstances of the phenomenon presented in the textural description were analyzed to provide an understanding of how the participants experienced them. This step integrated all the participants' individual descriptions into a universal structural description, generating themes.

Eidetic Insights. This last step provided the foundation for explaining the 'what' and 'how' of the experience shared by the participants. Through a process of reflection on the textural and structural descriptions, the essence of the experiences emerged.

3. Results and Discussion

Numerous studies have shown that lived experiences of teachers can be characterized as personal, social, and emotional [15] - [21]. This is what was likewise found in this study, which revealed that the lived experiences

of Filipino inclusion teachers, viewed under Kolb’s experiential learning process, were social and emotional in nature.

3.1 Challenges of Inclusion Teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Analysis of the texts from the interview transcripts revealed that most participants were faced with several challenges or demands during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from attending to the needs of the learners to addressing the concerns of their parents. Specifically, the demands of the job relate to the following: (a) caseload, (b) exceptionality characteristics, (c) physical distance, and (f) parents’ adjustment. Table 2 below captures the experiences of the Filipino inclusion teachers.

Caseload. The number of students with exceptionality could be demanding, as what Participant F revealed. This finding supports the claim of Jiang [22] that teachers feel burdened with the “abundance of assignments.” Having varied cases of exceptionality in the class meant that teachers would consequently feel overwhelmed in balancing the demands of teaching as well as managing behavior of students. A teacher given this type of caseload indicates that she would have additional responsibilities, which may include adapting lesson plans, incorporating materials that are more useful to students, and creating extra activities for the lesson [23]. Eventually, the demand for more time and energy will affecting physical and mental health. As what Robinson et al. [24] found out, many teachers have experienced elevated levels of stress and anxiety associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The demand to continuously adjust lesson plans, develop captivating content, and offer personalized support have intensified the stress and anxiety that teachers were already experiencing.

Table 2: Texts and themes regarding the challenges experiences by inclusion teachers

Participant	Textural Description	Extracted Theme
F	I handled many students in the primary levels during the pandemic. I had students with speech delay and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; and one had weakness in the lower limbs. I also taught students who showed signs of autism spectrum disorder.	Caseload
A	Let's start with the students... students with special needs, especially if the problem is attention. So, it was very difficult to get their attention.	Exceptionality characteristics
B	Let us say for example, they're doing an activity that engages them so much. But then you cannot control what suddenly happens because of the behavioral, you know... their behavioral challenge.	Exceptionality characteristics

D	During the online classes, you can really see their eyes not focusing, looking at other stuff instead of the screen or books. Some are even in the beds while on call.	Exceptionality characteristics
G	It was difficult because students with ADHD have behaviors. Most of the days, they need support in making them sit and learn.	Exceptionality characteristics
B	You are not there physically with them.	Physical distance
E	I was in the Philippines which had internet connectivity problems.	Physical distance
A	Many parents of our students who were working had to adjust at their workplaces while also adjusting with the online learning.	Parents' adjustment

Exceptionality Characteristics. The majority of participants described their lived experiences during the pandemic in Dubai as demanding since they must continuously deal with behavior problems of the learners with special needs. Not only were they tasked with navigating the difficulties of online teaching, but they encountered the challenge of managing behavior problems among learners with special needs under remote or distance settings. Averett [25] noted the observation made by some parents of elementary-aged children with autism and ADHD that their children were struggling with distraction and the ability to focus at home. This is reflected in Participant G's observation that students with ADHD have difficulty sitting for a long time during online learning.

Relatedly, Toquero [26] discovered that inclusive education teachers faced significant apprehension, particularly when managing the behavior of students with exceptionalities, an experience shared by many participants. They often felt guilt and self-doubt, believing they were unable to meet their students' needs. In this study, Participant G reported, "It is difficult because students with ADHD have behaviors." These teachers worried that their efforts were insufficient to support their students, which led to feelings of inadequacy and stress. The need to manage student behavior in such unprecedented circumstances further increased their responsibilities, requiring them to adopt unfamiliar strategies while ensuring the well-being and academic progress of all students.

Physical Distance. The teachers emphasized the challenges posed by the physical distancing required due to the contagious nature of COVID-19. The abrupt transition to remote or hybrid learning models created unique obstacles, especially for inclusive education teachers already managing the complexities of supporting students with diverse needs. Sari and Nayur [23] similarly reported that distance education presented significant difficulties, adding "extra burdens" on both teachers and students. The diminished support in terms of individualized learning, personalized guidance, and immediate feedback made it hard for teachers to establish meaningful connections with their students. Typically, teachers rely on visual and verbal cues to gauge student engagement with the lessons, but these cues were not available in the online learning environment, complicating

the assessment of students' needs and the provision of help with emotional or academic issues. Additionally, some teachers were suddenly isolated in areas where Internet connectivity was low.

Parents' Adjustment. From the descriptions in Table 2, it is evident that teachers found online or remote learning as challenging. They were concerned about working parents who were struggling with the online format, suddenly having to navigate digital platforms and provide necessary support to their children. Participant A revealed that parents also had to adjust to online learning, underscoring their crucial role in the educational transition during the pandemic. Teachers' concerns went beyond academic progress, considering the broader socio-emotional impact of the pandemic on families managing remote learning. Anbareen [27] examined these challenges and recommended that parents provide continuous supervision and guidance during online learning sessions. Sari and Maningtyas [28] also noted that parents played a significant role in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, helping their children complete school tasks.

3.2 Managing the Learning Environment During COVID-19 Pandemic

The second question in this study focused on how the Filipino inclusion education teachers responded to the challenges in managing the learning environment of inclusion classes in the United Arab Emirates during COVID-19. The themes that emerged from the texts were (a) intensified collaboration with parents and (b) curriculum adjustment. Two sub-themes were generated under "intensified collaboration with parents" – i.e., heightened communication and increased parental involvement. Similarly, sub-themes were also generated under "curriculum adjustments," namely: shift to online modalities; interactive online activities; online team teaching; and instructional modification. Table 3 provides the summary of the textual description and themes pertaining to the teachers' management of the learning environment.

Examined through Kolb's experiential learning cycle, the teachers' descriptions of their experiences in managing learning highlighted a journey from concrete experience and reflective observation into active experimentation. The initial phase of the COVID-19 lockdown presented an uncharted territory for them, their students with special needs, and the students' parents. Conducting online teaching sessions proved challenging, with one teacher noting that students had "eyes not focusing, looking at other stuff," and another mentioning that "it was very difficult to get their attention." Through reflection, the teachers adjusted their approaches and embraced a new perspective on managing the learning environment.

Intensified Collaboration with Parents. Filipino inclusion education teachers regarded parents as partners in the effective delivery of discussions among learners with special needs. Typically, the role of parents was limited to home support and involvement in parent-teacher conferences. With the difficulties encountered, parents were then seen by teachers in a different light --- i.e., as essential partners in the educational process who bring their expertise and valuable insights with them. Teachers constantly communicated with parents and asked for their support, even allowing parents to be co-teachers at home. Through regular check-ins, virtual meetings, and shared resources, teachers kept parents informed about lesson plans, progress, and strategies and settings tailored to meet the unique needs of their children. In this new educational landscape, parents were not merely passive observers

but were empowered, actively participating in discussions, providing feedback, and offering invaluable insights into their child's learning style and their kind of support. Such collaborative arrangement has been urged by experts [29] [30] as they benefit stakeholders in the students' academic success.

Curriculum Adjustments. Amid the global health crisis, the teachers actively sought and received assistance in implementing innovative strategies to maintain effective learning environments. Since it has been observed that parents find difficulty arranging materials for students at home [27], adjustments were made to the learning activities and teaching strategies so that students would continue to have access to the curriculum. In the shift to online learning, participants adapted their teaching to meet the needs of their students by showing video lessons and uploading tasks on different platforms available.

This was also true with the report made by Casimir et al. [31], disclosing that teachers had to quickly learn how to navigate online educational platforms during the pandemic. Similarly, Verulava [32] cited that in order to encourage engagement in the lessons, teachers resorted to platforms like *Zoom* and *Messenger* as they were easily accessible for both students and their parents. In the same vein, Lingayo, Dainne and Madriaga [33] reported that online classroom applications featuring interactive activities from *Twinkl* and manipulative apps like *ClassIn* were used effectively by teachers of students with special needs.

Table 3: Texts and themes regarding the management of the learning environment

Participant	Textural Description	Extracted Sub-Theme	Extracted Theme
B	There should be a constant communication with the parents.	Heightened communication	Intensified collaboration with parents
H	Since it was difficult to teach online, we asked for their [parents'] support.	Increased parental involvement	Intensified collaboration with parents
F	If the parents were present during the online classes, we would stop the recording. We give another link to have a separate discussion [about the lesson] with parents.	Increased parental involvement	Intensified collaboration with parents
H	We used Microsoft Teams and Zoom. We also uploaded tasks on Seesaw with video lessons.	Shift to online modalities	Curriculum adjustment
A	The resources were already available online and are in line with the curriculum that we are using here, which is the British curriculum.	Shift to online modalities	Curriculum adjustment

G	It was crazy, technically preparing a room set up with flashcards on the wall at home. I needed to create a lesson plan to facilitate engagement of students. Everything should be interactive.	Interactive online activities	Curriculum adjustment
H	We encouraged children to turn on their cameras... for engagement.	Interactive online activities	Curriculum adjustment
H	We were given a timetable on when we'll be online, who will be supporting online, and how we support others.	Online team teaching	Curriculum adjustment
F	'Pine-present namin ang' (we presented) videos routinely to the class online every day.	Instructional modification	Curriculum adjustment
E	I had to give activities that were achievable by both students and parents.	Instructional modification	Curriculum adjustment

The integration of technology into the teaching practices highlights its critical role as the enabler of remote or distance learning, maintaining continuity in the learning process. This implies that there should be continued professional development and support for teachers in this area, which would elevate teaching at par with other schools that use cutting-edge instructional techniques [34].

Apart from the online modality, teachers found the need to be interactive in implementing a lesson. For instance, Participant G showed flash cards to students online which helped her with sustaining attention. To address physical barriers during the pandemic, many teachers became creative and resourceful in enhancing their teaching methodologies [35][36]. In addition, there was careful consideration of the virtual setup as an important component of the learning environment [37] [38] to achieve the academic goals in school.

Participant H recalled how co-teaching helped in managing caseloads. With limited planning time in inclusive education, providing support for each other as teachers was invaluable [39]. Moreover, Participant E highlighted the significance of adapting tasks that are attainable for both parents and the student as a crucial element. As was reported by Yazcayir and Gurgur [40], despite the teachers being resourceful in sending worksheets through online software applications, many students with special needs encountered difficulties in following the lessons during the pandemic.

Viewed through Kolb's experiential learning cycle, the modification of instructional approaches was the effect of reflective thought processes as the Filipino inclusion teachers apprised the difficulties and challenges in the provision of teaching services. The resulting active experimentation with online learning demonstrated the

flexibility of teachers to ensure that learners continue to be engaged in course materials despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

4. Conclusion

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino inclusion teachers in Dubai faced a variety of problems encompassing educational, logistical, and social aspects. The caseload of teachers, the difficulties in handling different exceptionalities, the logistical constraints brought by physical distance, and worries about parental support in adjusting to the online learning modality were the sources of their challenges. To address these, the teachers saw themselves intensifying their collaboration or connection with parents, and implementing curriculum adjustments to meet the academic needs of their students. They increased the frequency of their communication with parents and encouraged greater parental involvement in the online learning sessions. They included team teaching, interactive strategies, and instructional modification as they shifted to online teaching modalities.

The findings hold implications for teacher preparation in the post-pandemic era in terms of training for online, virtual and remote learning modalities. As highlighted by Hamilton et al. [41], “the provision of support in terms of technology is crucial in ensuring continuation of teaching-learning activities during crises.” Additionally, it is imperative that schools establish a strong teacher-parent-administration partnership and take essential steps towards pandemic preparedness by conducting mock lockdowns. Likewise, it is necessary that during such crises, the social and emotional needs of educators are addressed as they face the challenges of navigating the remote learning environment while nurturing the academic and emotional well-being of students with exceptionalities.

5. Scope and Limitations

The study provided insights into the Filipino inclusion teachers’ experiences while teaching in Dubai during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it did not fully contextualize the challenges faced by the teachers in managing the learning environment amidst a crisis. Two reasons account for this, which can be considered opportunities for future research. First, the sample size of participants consisting of eight teachers, may have limited the understanding of their experiences as the broad perspective of a larger group was not captured. Second, the depth of the findings on their transformative strategies could not be attained given the short interviews that did not generate deep insights into the nuances of their experiences.

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