Research Article

Are we reaching 21st century learners status? Aspirations and realities for motivating and engaging classrooms

Jason V. Ang[1,*], Florabelle J. Corpin[1], Miguel E. Supremo, Jr.[1], Tyron James T. Ralar[1], Adelyn L. Tonalete[2]

[1] School of Teacher Education, Biliran Province State University, Naval, Biliran, 6560, Philippines

[2] School of Engineering, Biliran Province State University, Naval, Biliran, 6560, Philippines

* Corresponding author: Jason Visbal Ang, jason.ang@bipsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory research investigates the aspirations and realities of motivating and engaging 21st-century learners in Philippine higher education classrooms. It examines the challenges and opportunities presented by globalization, technology, and evolving learning styles, utilizing the frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). The study explored the perspectives of 40 education teachers from Eastern Visayas, Philippines through in-depth interviews, focusing on their aspirations for student motivation and engagement, their observations of current learners, and their strategies for fostering a supportive and dynamic learning environment. The findings highlight the need to align teaching practices with psychological principles such as emotional intelligence, autonomy, relatedness, and balanced technology integration. The study concludes by emphasizing the crucial role of professional development for educators in equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to create motivating and engaging classrooms that meet the needs of 21st-century learners.

Keywords: 21st century learners; aspirations; realities; motivaion

1. Introduction

In a globalized era, developing a workforce with strong global competencies has become indispensable for nations aiming to stay competitive on the international stage[1]. With rapid advancements in technology, communication systems, and interconnected economies, individuals must adapt to complex cultural, economic, and political dynamics. For the Philippines, characterized by its vibrant economy and growing youth demographic, fostering global competence is a pressing priority. This calls for a transformative approach within the Philippine education system to align with the demands of the 21st-century global landscape[2].

Achieving quality education goes beyond academic success; it requires an inclusive strategy that prioritizes students' psychological and emotional development. Karatsiori[3] highlights that "quality" is a dynamic concept shaped by specific contexts and valued for its ability to address diverse needs. Abdallah et al.[4] further emphasize that superior teaching practices and education services are integral to fostering academic excellence. Modern classrooms aim to cultivate critical thinking, emotional resilience, and intrinsic

motivation—marking a shift from conventional content-focused instruction. Psychological principles underpin these shifts, offering vital insights into crafting educational experiences that empower learners to manage emotions, foster relationships, and take ownership of their learning.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a significant psychological framework, plays a central role in this transformation. It highlights the importance of meeting students' intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Richard and Edward[5] describe SDT as a comprehensive model that addresses factors influencing intrinsic motivation and well-being, making it particularly relevant to modern education. Fostering student autonomy and building confidence in their abilities, SDT supports the creation of engaging and learnercentered classrooms. In parallel, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) emerges as a critical component for both individual and societal progress. Sultan et al.[6] argue that SEL fosters emotional intelligence and social cohesion, bridging theoretical and practical gaps in education.

This research integrates SDT and SEL to address two pressing challenges: aligning educational aspirations with the realities of fostering motivation and effectively balancing technological advancements with emotional and relational development. As Filipino students increasingly engage with global and technological trends, aligning teaching strategies with these psychological principles is crucial for nurturing well-rounded learners. By incorporating these frameworks, this study explores how educators can align their aspirations with the realities of 21st-century classrooms. The findings aim to identify strategies that promote motivation, engagement, and holistic development, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and impactful educational practices.

To ground this investigation, the following section presents a review of current literature on educational reforms, psychological frameworks, and the evolving demands of 21st-century learners in both global and Philippine contexts.

2. Literature

According to Leon et al.[7], Filipino students typically dedicate around 18 years to formal education to earn a bachelor's degree. This educational journey includes kindergarten, six years of elementary education, four years of junior high school, two years of senior high school, and at least four years in tertiary education. The mandatory K-12 program, which spans kindergarten through grade 12, ensures that students receive 13 years of foundational education before they can decide whether to pursue higher education[8]. Thus, a significant portion of a student's early life is spent within the classroom.

In recent years, the Philippines has recognized the importance of developing a curriculum that integrates local knowledge with a global perspective. The interconnectedness of nations and pressing global challenges—such as climate change, economic instability, and technological disruptions—have led the Philippine education sector to reexamine its priorities. Hara[9] underscores the shift towards creating globally competent graduates through innovative and adaptive educational strategies. However, Balinggan[10] highlights persistent challenges, including the need for enhanced teacher training, better technological integration, and curriculum alignment with evolving global trends.

The focus on cultivating 21st-century skills has become a cornerstone for improving instructional quality. Despite these efforts, Kim et al.[11] emphasize that the lack of contextspecific approaches to teaching practices and professional development for educators remains a critical obstacle. Mark[12] adds that the modern educational paradigm prioritizes preparing students for global economic success by equipping them with essential competencies like collaboration, digital literacy, and adaptability.

2.1. Self-determination theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) serves as a psychological framework emphasizing the intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are foundational for motivation and well-being[13]. Barrable[14] highlights that supporting these basic needs fosters inclusivity and wellness, whereas neglecting them leads to adverse effects on learners. Deci and Ryan[15] further elaborate that fulfilling these universal needs enhances individuals' psychological health, while unmet needs contribute to feelings of isolation and diminished engagement[16].

2.2. Social-emotional learning (SEL)

Similarly, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) plays a pivotal role in promoting academic readiness and success. Raver and Knitzer[17]. emphasize that students equipped with strong SEL skills exhibit higher classroom participation, positive attitudes, and academic engagement. These skills also foster acceptance among peers and enable teachers to provide constructive feedback. Self-determination, as a psychological construct, refers to volitional actions taken by people based on their own will, and self-determined behaviour comes from intentional, conscious choice, and decision[18,19]. According to Susanne[20], effective SEL programs combine evidence-based curricula with teacher support, clear benchmarks, and tools for monitoring progress. Social and emotional learning (SEL) has acquired great prominence in recent years, due to the skills it develops in students, influencing personal and social well-being. At the same time, society is moving toward a model in which understanding oneself and others is a fundamental aspect in order to function properly on a social level[21].

Kaspar and Massey[22] argue that meeting students' social and emotional needs is essential for their academic success and ability to thrive in a globalized world. Integrating SEL into the curriculum ensures a nurturing environment that balances emotional growth with academic learning[23]. Moreover, Isbell and Miller[24] stress the importance of equipping teachers with SEL training to manage stress, reduce burnout, and improve retention, fostering an environment where both educators and students can thrive.

Furthermore, challenges persist in the Philippine educational landscape, particularly regarding the responsibilities of teachers. Hobbs and Porsch[25] point out that educators often handle multiple subject areas beyond their specialization, a phenomenon seen globally but with varying responses and implications. As Tomlinson[26] observes, teachers bear the primary responsibility for preparing students with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in an increasingly globalized workforce.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to examine the aspirations and realities of motivating and engaging 21st-century learners in higher education classrooms. As characterized by Jason and Rosalina[27], exploratory research is adaptable and open-ended, providing the flexibility needed to delve into various facets of a subject without being confined by rigid structures. Its primary goal is to collect initial data, identify trends, and generate ideas that may inform more comprehensive future research. The qualitative approach enabled an indepth exploration of the experiences and strategies of education teachers, Focusing on the psychological principles they use to foster engagement and motivation. Flexible interview protocols guided the data collection, ensuring that insights aligned with the objectives of the study.

3.2. Population and sampling

The study included 40 education teachers from higher education institutions in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. A purposive sampling method, as described by Aldrin and Micah[28], was used to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research aims. This nonprobability sampling technique ensured that individuals with substantial teaching experience and familiarity with the challenges of engaging contemporary learners were included. By selecting participants with these qualifications, the study gained rich, context-specific insights into the psychological and pedagogical dimensions of 21st-century classrooms.

3.3. Instrument

Table 1 shows a flexible interview guide served as the primary instrument for data collection. This guide comprised open-ended questions, which facilitated in-depth exploration of teachers' aspirations, observed classroom dynamics, and strategies for fostering motivation. Open-ended questions, according to Savellon et al.[29], allow participants to freely articulate their thoughts, experiences, and viewpoints, making them an effective tool for qualitative research. These questions also provided opportunities for follow-up inquiries, enabling the researchers to probe deeper into participants' responses. The interview guide emphasized psychological theories such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to align participant responses with the study's focus on motivation and engagement.

Table 1. Instrument of the study.

Objectives	Interview questions	Participants
Determine the aspirations of teachers for 21st learners in terms of a motivating and engaging classroom.	1. In terms of motivation and engagement, what is your general view of the 21st century learners in a Philippine setting? Explain further. 2. Describe your aspiration for a motivated and engaged learners in the 21st century. Elaborate through situations. 3. What are the observable scenarios in a 21st century classroom? Enumerate and explain each scenario.	Education teachers in higher education.
Determine the status of the current learners against the goal of having 21st learners who are motivated and engaged in a classroom.	1. What are your observations in terms of our current learners versus the aspiration of achieving the 21st century learners? 2. Can the 21st century classrooms promote motivation and engagement to our learners? Explain how. 3. How can the current status of learners and classrooms promote motivation and engagements to our learners while we are still in the process of achieving the 21st-century earners? Explain in specific suggestions.	

3.4. Data gathering procedure

The data gathering process involved conducting interviews tailored to the participants' preferences and availability. These interviews were conducted in a conversational and respectful manner, fostering a comfortable environment where participants could openly share their insights. Prior to the interviews, participants were thoroughly informed about the study's objectives, and their consent was secured. As Bucoy et al.[30] highlight, interviews offer a valuable platform for exploring participants' perspectives and experiences. The interviews were carefully documented to ensure the comprehensive capture of the educators' narratives.

3.5. Data analysis

The data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, an approach that emphasizes identifying and interpreting recurring patterns and themes in qualitative data. This process involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts to ensure familiarity with the content, followed by coding significant ideas. The codes were then grouped into overarching themes that aligned with the study's objectives, such as aspirations for motivating learners, challenges faced in classrooms, and strategies rooted in psychological theories for fostering engagement. Reflexive thematic analysis, which allows for iterative and detailed interpretation, ensured that the findings remained closely tied to the study's focus on psychological frameworks and engagement strategies. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants and reflective member-checking, where participants validated synthesized themes.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Adhering to strict ethical guidelines was a key component of this study to protect the participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Pseudonyms were employed to further protect their identities, and all data were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. Participants were made aware that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without consequences. Michael and Omoruyi[31] emphasize that ethical considerations are essential in safeguarding participant welfare and maintaining the credibility of research findings. This commitment to ethical standards ensured that the study was conducted with respect, fairness, and adherence to psychological principles of care. With ethical safeguards and data analysis protocols established, the following section presents the key findings drawn from the participants' interviews

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. Determine the aspirations of teachers for 21st-century learners in terms of a motivating and engaging classroom.

Question No. 1. In terms of motivation and engagement, what is your general view of the 21st century learners in a Philippine setting? Explain further.

1.1 *Global Trends and Local Realities*

Twenty (20) respondents expressed that with globalization, Filipino learners are exposed to global perspectives, ideas, and trends, which can help broaden their worldviews and improve engagement. The emphasis on 21st-century skills such as collaboration, digital literacy, and communication aligns well with the global demands for a competitive workforce, encouraging students to be more motivated to participate in modern learning methods. Education teachers in Philippine higher education generally view globalization as a powerful force in shaping the motivation and engagement of Filipino learners. It has opened up new avenues for learning, collaboration, and skill development that are highly relevant in today's globalized economy. However, challenges related to equitable access to resources and technology remain.

> " With globalization, Filipino learners are exposed to global perspectives, ideas, and trends, which can help broaden their worldviews and improve engagement."

> "Educators in higher education often point out that globalization has opened up access to an unprecedented wealth of information. Teachers see this as a double-edged sword: while it offers many learning opportunities, it also requires students to develop the critical thinking skills to assess and filter information effectively."

1.2 *Technological Influence*

Thirty two (32) respondents expressed that they recognize today's learners in the Philippines are highly used to technology. Digital platforms and online resources are not only familiar to them but are often integral to their learning experiences. Learners are accustomed to using social media, apps, and other digital tools to enhance their academic performance, leading to a shift in teaching methods. Educators integrate multimedia and interactive platforms to enhance student engagement. Filipino learners are highly attuned to digital tools, and educators have adapted their teaching methods to incorporate interactive, multimedia-rich, and collaborative platforms.

> "Many educators recognize that today's learners in the Philippines are highly attuned to technology. Teachers can utilize multimedia, interactive platforms, and online learning modules to increase engagement."

> "By leveraging multimedia resources—such as videos, podcasts, simulations, and online discussions—teachers can present content in a variety of ways that appeal to different learning styles."

Question No. 2. Describe your aspiration for a motivated and engaged learners in the 21st century. Elaborate through situations.

2.1 *Encouraging Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving*

Thirty six (36) respondents believed that the key to motivating students in the 21st century is not merely delivering content but fostering an environment where students are challenged to think critically and solve real-world problems. They want their students to engage in deep, meaningful work that connects theory with practice, developing skills that extend beyond the classroom. Motivated students feel empowered to tackle pressing issues and understand the relevance of their education, moving beyond traditional assessments to demonstrate their abilities through applied projects. The aspiration is for students to leave the classroom not just with knowledge, but with the ability to apply that knowledge in innovative ways, solve complex problems, collaborate effectively, and adapt to an ever-changing world.

> "This educator believes that the key to motivating students in the 21st century is not merely delivering content but fostering an environment where students are challenged to think critically and solve real-world problems."

> "Educators who focus on fostering critical thinking and problem-solving emphasize the importance of connecting academic learning with real-world contexts. By embedding practical applications within theoretical lessons, students gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter and can see its relevance beyond the classroom."

2.2 *Leveraging Technology to Enhance Engagement*

Twenty five (25) respondents expressed that they are focused on utilizing technology to enhance student engagement. By integrating multimedia tools, they aim to bring history to life in ways that traditional lectures cannot. The goal is to make learning more dynamic and personalized, appealing to various learning styles. Students are more engaged and excited about learning, as technology helps them visualize complex concepts and interact with course content in a more interactive and immersive way. They are also developing valuable digital literacy skills that are essential in the 21st-century workforce. The use of technology in higher education enables educators to create dynamic, engaging, and personalized learning experiences that go beyond traditional methods.

"The goal is to make learning more dynamic and personalized, appealing to various learning styles. Students are more engaged and excited about learning, as technology helps them visualize complex concepts and interact with course content in a more interactive and immersive way."

"Educators in higher education are increasingly recognizing the potential of technology to not only enhance student engagement but also create more personalized, dynamic learning experiences that cater to diverse learning styles."

Question No. 3. What are the observable scenarios in a 21st century classroom? Enumerate and explain each scenario.

3.1 *Technology Integration and Digital Learning Tools*

Thirty (30) respondents expressed that technology is no longer an add-on but a core component of instruction. It's about making learning more accessible, flexible, and collaborative. They emphasize the need for digital literacy in preparing students for modern careers. Technology is integrated into classrooms to enhance learning through tools like learning management systems (LMS), multimedia resources, and virtual simulations. They may leverage tools such as Google Classroom, Moodle, or Zoom for hybrid or fully online classes, fostering an interactive and flexible learning environment. The rise of online platforms, multimedia resources, adaptive learning tools, and immersive technologies has reshaped how instructors engage students, offering dynamic, personalized, and interactive learning experiences.

"Technology is no longer an add-on but a core component of instruction. It's about making learning more accessible, flexible, and collaborative. They emphasize the need for digital literacy in preparing students for modern careers."

""Technology allows me to meet students where they are. Whether they need resources in multiple formats (videos, articles, podcasts) or require accommodations for disabilities, technology ensures everyone has access to the learning materials they need."

3.2 *Flipped Classroom Models*

Twenty (20) respondents expressed that flipping the classroom allows for more dynamic and interactive use of class time. Students come prepared, and we can spend time on higher-order learning activities. The flipped classroom model inverts the traditional learning structure, where students first encounter new information outside class and then use class time to deepen their understanding through application. This method supports a more personalized approach to learning, allowing students to learn at their own pace and engage in more meaningful in-class interactions. Teachers in higher education recognize that the flipped classroom model transforms the learning environment by shifting responsibility onto students and emphasizing active, collaborative, and higher-order learning.

" Flipping the classroom allows for more dynamic and interactive use of class time. Students come prepared, and we can spend time on higher-order learning activities."

"In a flipped classroom, we can do activities like case studies, problem-solving exercises, or group discussions, which are much more effective than traditional lectures."

Research Objectives 2. Determine the status of the current learners against the goal of having 21st learners who are motivated and engaged in a classroom.

Question No. 1. What are your observations in terms of our current learners versus the aspiration of achieving the 21st century learners?

1.1 *Digital Literacy vs. Digital Dependence*

Fifteen (15) respondents expressed that current Learners are highly adept at using digital tools and technologies, but their skills often lean towards personal or social use (e.g., social media, entertainment, or communication). They may struggle with critical thinking in digital spaces or have limited skills in using digital tools for learning and productivity while the aspiration of achieving 21st century learners is more balanced mastery of technology— where students not only consume information but also critically analyze, create, and innovate with it. This involves deeper digital literacy, including knowledge of how algorithms work, ethical issues around data, and the ability to use digital tools for collaboration, research, and problem-solving.

> "Current Learners are highly adept at using digital tools and technologies, but their skills often lean towards personal or social use while the aspiration of achieving the 21st century learners is more balanced mastery of technology where students not only consume information but also critically analyze, create, and innovate with it."

> "They may also have limited skills in discerning biases in algorithms that curate their digital content, such as search engine results or social media feeds."

1.2 *Critical Thinking vs. Memorization*

Twenty four(24) respondents expressed that for current learners the focus on standardized testing and exams in many education systems still leads to a heavy emphasis on memorization and regurgitation of facts. While there is some room for critical thinking, the pressure to perform often curtails deep engagement with content while Aspiration for 21st-century Learner's goal is for learners to be critical thinkers who can analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from various sources. They should be able to question assumptions, make informed decisions, and develop solutions to complex, real-world problems. This requires moving away from rote memorization towards inquiry-based learning and fostering curiosity.

> "Focus on standardized testing and exams in many education systems still leads to a heavy emphasis on memorization and regurgitation of facts."

> "The distinction between current learners, who are often shaped by traditional, exam-based educational systems, and the aspiration for 21st-century learners, who are expected to be critical thinkers and problem-solvers, highlights significant shifts in both teaching philosophy and assessment methods."

Question No. 2. Can the 21st century classrooms promote motivation and engagement to our learners? Explain how.

2.1 *Technology Integration*

Thirty four (34) participants emphasized that digital tools such as adaptive platforms and multimedia resources offer personalized, engaging, and flexible learning experiences that foster motivation and enhance academic performance. These tools allow for personalized learning paths, enabling students to learn at their

own pace, which is especially motivating for diverse learners. By leveraging these tools, educators can cultivate a more motivating and enriching environment for higher education students.

> "Incorporating technology into the classroom not only helps students stay engaged but also motivates them to explore new ways of learning. Interactive tools, digital platforms, and multimedia resources make lessons more dynamic."

> "Technology allows for adaptive learning tools that can adjust the pace, difficulty, and style of instruction based on individual student needs."

2.2. *Student-Centered Learning*

Thirty two (32) respondents expressed that a shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods to student-centered approaches is essential for boosting motivation. When students are actively involved in their learning through project-based learning, problem-solving, and peer collaboration, they tend to feel more ownership of their education. This fosters intrinsic motivation, as students are no longer passive recipients but active participants in the learning process. Shifting to student-centered approaches empowers learners by fostering ownership, enhancing engagement, and encouraging active participation in the learning process. This not only motivates students but also equips them with the skills and confidence to succeed in their academic and professional lives.

> "A shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods to student-centered approaches is essential for boosting motivation."

> "When students take an active role in their learning, they begin to feel a sense of ownership over their education. In project-based learning or inquiry-based learning environments, students make decisions about their approach, explore their own questions, and engage in problem-solving"

2.3 Real-World Connections

Twenty (20) respondents expressed that connecting lessons to real-world problems and applications can greatly enhance student engagement. When students see how their academic work relates to real-life challenges, they are more likely to see the relevance and value in what they are learning. This relevance often fuels both their motivation and enthusiasm to engage in the classroom. Teachers noted that relating lessons to real-life contexts increases learner motivation by highlighting the relevance and applicability of academic content. Whether through community involvement, interdisciplinary projects, or simulations, students are more likely to feel motivated when they see the tangible impact of their studies in the world around them.

> "When students see how their academic work relates to real-life challenges, they are more likely to see the relevance and value in what they are learning."

> "Connecting academic lessons to real-world problems prepares students for their future careers. In my course on healthcare, for instance, students are tasked with analyzing current health issues such as mental health, policy reform, or global health crises."

Question No. 3. How can the current status of learners and classrooms promote motivation and engagements to our learners while we are still in the process of achieving the 21st-century learners? Explain specific suggestions.

3.1 *Personalized Learning*

Twenty six (26) participants mentioned offering students the choice of projects or papers where they can explore topics that align with their personal interests or career goals. When students see that their unique abilities and interests are being acknowledged, they become more motivated to engage. This also allows for differentiated support, making learning feel more relevant and accessible. By providing students with the freedom to explore topics that are personally relevant, instructors not only enhance engagement but also help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and independent research skills.

> "Offering students the choice of projects or papers where they can explore topics that align with their personal interests or career goals. When students see that their unique abilities and interests are being acknowledged, they become more motivated to engage."

> "Many instructors notice that students are more engaged when they can relate academic work to real-world applications."

3.2 *Blended Learning Approaches*

Thirty two (32) participants shared that using online discussion boards for peer-to-peer interaction and reflection and in-class activities for hands-on application of knowledge. Blended learning respects students' digital fluency, allowing them to take advantage of online resources for deeper exploration, while still benefiting from the social and academic engagement that in-person classes provide. Integrating online and in-class components, teachers can cater to different learning styles, promote deeper engagement, and prepare students for a world where technology and collaboration are central.

> "Blended learning respects students' digital fluency, allowing them to take advantage of online resources for deeper exploration, while still benefiting from the social and academic engagement that in-person classes provide."

> " Instructors point out that blended learning allows them to cater to different learning styles. Some students prefer visual or auditory content, while others excel in discussions or hands-on experiences. "

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the intricate relationship between the aspirations of educators and the realities of fostering motivation and engagement in 21st-century classrooms. Examined through the frameworks of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Self Determination Theory (SDT), these results shed light on how psychological and emotional factors influence both teaching practices and student outcomes.

The study highlighted that Filipino learners, shaped by global trends and local contexts, are exposed to vast information and technological advancements. While these developments offer opportunities for expanding perspectives, they also present challenges, particularly in emotional regulation and critical thinking. Respondents noted that excessive reliance on technology often leads to overstimulation, which necessitates stronger emotional management skills among students to remain engaged. Abiodullah et al.[32] emphasize the significance of emotional intelligence as a key psychological concept, which aligns with this observation. SEL strategies such as promoting empathy through collaborative discussions or fostering self-awareness in digital interactions are essential for addressing these challenges. These methods align with educators' aspirations to create emotionally supportive classrooms where students feel secure, connected, and ready to learn.

Collaboration emerged as a vital aspect of enhancing emotional engagement. Teachers observed that structured group activities not only foster interpersonal skills but also cultivate a sense of belonging, a central tenet of SEL. As professionals charged with fostering student learning and well-being, educators—school leaders, teachers, school counselors, preservice teachers—should demonstrate social emotional competence[33]. Greenberg et al.[34] and Mahoney et al.[35] confirm the academic benefits of SEL programs, emphasizing their role in preparing students for the complexities of the 21st century. This sense of connection also addresses the isolation often associated with excessive digital tool usage, demonstrating the importance of SEL in creating motivated and engaged learners in technology-enriched settings. Furthermore, educators who embrace adaptability and cultivate a shared passion for the subject with their students create a more engaging and enjoyable learning environment, enabling them to meet evolving educational demands[36,37].

A key theme in the findings is the role of autonomy in promoting student motivation. Respondents expressed the need to move away from traditional teacher-centered methods toward learner-driven approaches. Eslit[38] notes that conventional teaching methods alone are insufficient for equipping students with the competencies needed for a complex and interconnected world. Strategies such as project-based learning and personalized assignments, which allow students to align their learning with personal interests, directly reflect SDT's emphasis on autonomy and competence[39]. Providing opportunities for choice and consistent feedback, students gain a sense of ownership over their learning, fostering intrinsic motivation. Moreover, scaffolding support builds their confidence to tackle more advanced tasks, further enhancing their competence.

The findings also underscore the importance of relatedness, another core principle of SDT, in fostering classroom relationships. Teachers emphasized that collaborative learning environments not only increase engagement but also create a sense of community among students. Cagatan et al.[40] highlight that collaborative structures encourage dialogue and interaction, fostering a sense of connectedness and belonging. This aligns with educators' aspirations to establish classrooms where students feel emotionally and socially supported while striving for academic excellence.

According to Purmayanti[41] the gap between educators' aspirations and classroom realities is particularly evident in challenges related to digital literacy. While students excel in using technology for personal and social purposes, many struggle to apply these skills effectively in academic contexts. Respondents noted that learners often rely on digital tools for passive consumption rather than active learning, highlighting the need for balanced integration of technology and critical thinking. SEL and SDT provide practical solutions to this issue. Warsah et al.[42] support that incorporating reflective digital practices such as journaling about online experiences or engaging in collaborative problem-solving activities can deepen engagement while fostering emotional resilience and autonomy. Parveen and Ramzan[43] emphasize that technology has significantly improved accessibility and efficiency in education, enabling learners to enhance their experiences through tools like the internet and multimedia aids.

Finally, respondents identified professional development as crucial for addressing these challenges. Training teachers in SEL and SDT principles can equip them with strategies to create emotionally supportive and autonomy-centered classrooms. Workshops on managing group dynamics or designing autonomy-enhancing tasks can empower educators to meet the diverse needs of modern learners while achieving their aspirations for motivating and engaging classrooms.

6. Conclusion

The study reveals a complex interplay between educators' aspirations and the realities of motivating and engaging 21st-century learners in Philippine higher education. While Filipino learners are exposed to global trends and technological advancements, they also face challenges related to emotional regulation, critical thinking, and balancing digital fluency with active learning. The findings underscore the importance of integrating psychological principles such as SEL and SDT into teaching practices to address these challenges.

The emphasis on emotional intelligence, fostering a sense of belonging through collaboration, and promoting autonomy through learner-driven approaches are crucial for creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. The study highlights the need for a balanced integration of technology, emphasizing critical thinking and active learning over passive consumption.

The gap between educators' aspirations and classroom realities underscores the importance of professional development for teachers. Training in SEL and SDT principles can equip educators with the tools and strategies to create emotionally supportive and autonomycentered classrooms that meet the diverse needs of modern learners. Embracing these frameworks, educators can foster a more inclusive and impactful learning experience, ultimately contributing to the development of well-rounded and globally competent individuals.

These insights hold significance for policymakers, teacher-educators, and institutional leaders. Developing engaged and motivated 21st-century learners demands systemic shifts—investments in teacher capacity, revisions to curriculum that support autonomy and emotional growth, and frameworks for equitable technology integration. The intersection of emotional intelligence, digital fluency, and global readiness is where true 21st-century learning unfolds. By rooting these practices in evidence-based psychological principles, education systems can better respond to the evolving needs of learners and the demands of an increasingly complex world

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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