



International Journal of Early Childhood, Special and Inclusive Education

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2026 |
<https://azalpub.com/index.php/AAH>

OPEN ACCESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Article Info

Received:02/5/2026
Accepted:4-/25/2026
Published:6/18/2026

NAVIGATING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MULTIGRADE CLASSROOMS: LIVED EXPERIENCES AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences and pedagogical practices of elementary teachers implementing inclusive education in multigrade classrooms at Cabeceria 27 Elementary School, Isabela, Philippines. Grounded in inclusive education principles and multigrade pedagogy, the study aims to examine how teachers navigate diverse learner needs, implement inclusive strategies, and address contextual challenges in a rural public school setting. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to capture the depth of teachers' experiences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving purposively selected elementary teachers handling Grades 4 to 6. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings. Findings revealed four major themes: (1) differentiated and flexible pedagogy as a cornerstone of inclusion, (2) collaborative and peer-assisted learning in multigrade settings, (3) contextualized and resourceful instructional practices, and (4) systemic constraints affecting inclusive implementation. Teachers demonstrated adaptability by employing differentiated instruction, real-life contextualization, and collaborative strategies to address diverse learner needs. However, challenges such as limited resources, insufficient training in inclusive education, and heavy workload significantly influenced instructional effectiveness. The study underscores the critical role of teacher agency and contextual innovation in sustaining inclusive education in multigrade classrooms. It recommends strengthening professional development, providing adequate instructional resources, and enhancing institutional support systems. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive and multigrade education in developing contexts and provide implications for policy, practice, and future research aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, multigrade classrooms, lived experiences, differentiated instruction, Philippines*

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Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central educational reform agenda globally, emphasizing equitable access and participation for all learners, including those with diverse abilities and backgrounds. In the Philippine context, the implementation of inclusive education is institutionalized through DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009, which promotes the integration of learners with special needs into regular classrooms through appropriate support systems.

Multigrade classrooms, commonly found in rural and geographically isolated areas, present both opportunities and challenges for inclusive education. These classrooms consist of learners from two or more grade levels handled by a single teacher, requiring flexible and adaptive instructional approaches. While multigrade settings inherently support diversity, they also intensify the complexity of addressing varying learner needs simultaneously.

Existing studies highlight that teachers in multigrade and inclusive settings employ strategies such as differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and contextualized teaching to enhance learner engagement. However, challenges persist, including limited training, insufficient resources, and heavy teaching loads.

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a gap in understanding the localized lived experiences of teachers in rural Philippine contexts, particularly in multigrade inclusive classrooms. This study addresses this gap by examining how elementary teachers in Cabecera 27 Elementary School navigate inclusive education practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Inclusive Education Theory and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, emphasizing the need to accommodate diverse learners through equitable instructional practices. It is also informed by Differentiated Instruction Theory, which highlights the adaptation of content, process, and product to meet varied learner needs. Inclusive classrooms require individualized support, collaborative learning, and flexible instructional strategies to ensure all learners participate meaningfully. In multigrade settings, these principles are further reinforced through peer-assisted learning and multi-level instruction.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to deeply explore and capture the lived experiences of teachers implementing inclusive education within multigrade classroom settings. The phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive, interpret, and respond to the complexities of teaching diverse learners across multiple grade levels. The study was conducted at Cabecera 27 Elementary School, a rural public school located in the City of Ilagan, Isabela, Philippines, where multigrade teaching is practiced due to contextual realities such as limited resources and teacher allocation. Participants of the study consisted of elementary teachers handling Grades 4 to 6 in multigrade classes, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience and involvement in inclusive teaching practices. Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and richness of information, including semi-structured interviews that elicited detailed personal narratives, classroom observations that documented actual instructional practices and learner interactions, and document analysis of lesson plans and instructional materials to triangulate reported practices. The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which involved systematic processes of familiarization, coding, categorization, and the development of meaningful themes that reflect recurring patterns in the data. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, established qualitative criteria were strictly observed, including credibility through member checking and prolonged engagement, dependability through maintaining a clear audit trail of research procedures, confirmability through triangulation of multiple data sources, and transferability through the provision of thick descriptions that allow readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Results/Findings

Theme 1: Differentiated and Flexible Pedagogy as a Cornerstone of Inclusion

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of differentiated and flexible pedagogy in addressing the diverse needs of learners in multigrade inclusive classrooms. Given the presence of multiple grade levels and varying learner abilities within a single classroom, teachers adopted adaptive strategies that allowed them to modify instruction according to learners' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. These strategies included tiered instruction, scaffolding, flexible grouping, remediation sessions, and enrichment tasks.

Teachers also highlighted the need for continuous monitoring and assessment to ensure that instructional adjustments were responsive to learners' progress. Lesson delivery was often non-linear, allowing teachers to move between grade levels and adjust pacing based on learners' comprehension. This flexibility enabled teachers to create inclusive learning environments where all learners could participate meaningfully.

Responses:

"Hindi pare-pareho ang kakayahan ng mga bata kaya ina-adjust ko ang activities."

(Not all learners have the same abilities, so I adjust the activities.)

"Yung iba mabilis makaintindi, kaya binibigyan ko sila ng mas mahirap na gawain habang tinutulungan ko yung nahuhuli."

(Some learners understand quickly, so I give them more challenging tasks while I assist those who are behind.)

"Dahan-dahan ang pagtuturo sa iba, pero sa iba naman pwede nang pabilisin."

(Teaching is slower for some, but for others, it can be accelerated.)

"Kailangan talagang mag-iba-iba ng paraan kasi hindi sila pare-pareho ng level."

(It is necessary to vary teaching strategies because they are not at the same level.)

These findings strongly support the principles of differentiated instruction, which emphasize tailoring instruction to meet diverse learner needs. The teachers' adaptive practices reflect a deep understanding of inclusive pedagogy, where equity is achieved not through uniformity but through responsiveness. This aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) framework, which underscores the importance of modifying content, process, and product to accommodate learner diversity.

Moreover, the flexibility observed in instructional delivery highlights the dynamic nature of teaching in multigrade classrooms. Teachers function not only as facilitators of learning but also as instructional designers who continuously adjust their approaches. This reinforces the idea that inclusive education is not merely a policy directive but a lived pedagogical practice that requires creativity, responsiveness, and professional judgment.

Theme 2: Collaborative and Peer-Assisted Learning in Multigrade Settings

Collaborative and peer-assisted learning emerged as a central strategy in managing multigrade inclusive classrooms. Teachers maximized the heterogeneity of the classroom by encouraging learners to support one another through peer tutoring, group work, and cooperative learning activities. Older or more advanced learners often served as facilitators or mentors to younger or struggling peers, creating a supportive and interactive learning environment.

This approach not only reduced the instructional burden on teachers but also fostered a sense of responsibility, cooperation, and social cohesion among learners. Teachers intentionally structured activities that promoted interaction, dialogue, and shared learning experiences.

Responses:

"Yung mas magaling, tinutulungan nila yung nahihirapan."

(The more capable learners help those who struggle.)

“Pinapartner ko yung mabilis matuto sa medyo nahuhuli para matulungan sila.”

(I pair fast learners with those who are slower so they can be helped.)

“Nagiging teacher din yung ibang bata kasi sila ang nagtuturo sa kaklase nila.”

(Some learners become like teachers because they help teach their classmates.)

“Mas natututo sila kapag nagtutulungan kaysa puro ako lang ang nagsasalita.”

(They learn more when they help each other rather than when I am the only one speaking.)

The findings affirm that multigrade classrooms naturally lend themselves to collaborative learning environments. Peer-assisted learning aligns with social constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction. The use of peer tutoring not only enhances academic learning but also promotes social and emotional development, including empathy, cooperation, and leadership skills.

Furthermore, this strategy reflects inclusive education principles by valuing learners as active contributors to the learning process rather than passive recipients. It also demonstrates how teachers strategically utilize classroom diversity as an asset rather than a limitation. This supports existing literature that highlights the effectiveness of collaborative learning in improving both cognitive and social outcomes in diverse classroom settings.

Theme 3: Contextualized and Resourceful Instructional Practices

Teachers demonstrated strong resourcefulness by utilizing contextualized and localized teaching approaches. Due to limited access to instructional materials, teachers relied on improvised resources and real-life examples drawn from the learners' immediate environment. Lessons were often anchored in familiar contexts such as community practices, local livelihoods, and everyday experiences.

This approach made learning more meaningful, relatable, and engaging for learners. Teachers emphasized that contextualization helped bridge the gap between abstract concepts and real-world application, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention.

Responses:

“Ginagamit ko ang mga halimbawa na nakikita nila sa paligid.”

(I use examples they see in their surroundings.)

“Kahit walang materials, gumagawa ako ng paraan gamit ang available sa classroom.”

(Even without materials, I find ways using what is available in the classroom.)

“Mas naiintindihan nila kapag halimbawa ay tungkol sa buhay nila.”

(They understand better when examples are related to their lives.)

“Kung ano ang meron sa komunidad, yun ang ginagawa kong teaching material.”

(Whatever is available in the community becomes my teaching material.)

The use of contextualized teaching reflects the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes the integration of learners' cultural and social contexts into instruction. This approach enhances learner engagement and promotes deeper understanding by connecting new knowledge to prior experiences.

Additionally, teacher resourcefulness highlights the critical role of creativity and innovation in resource-constrained environments. Rather than being limited by the lack of materials, teachers transform their context into a rich learning resource. This finding reinforces the idea that effective teaching is not solely dependent on material availability but also on the teacher's ability to adapt and innovate.

Theme 4: Systemic Constraints Affecting Inclusive Implementation

Despite the effective strategies employed by teachers, systemic constraints significantly affected the implementation of inclusive education. Teachers identified several challenges, including insufficient training in inclusive and special education, lack of instructional materials, large class sizes, and heavy workload associated with handling multiple grade levels.

These constraints often resulted in physical and emotional strain, limiting teachers' capacity to fully implement inclusive practices. Teachers expressed the need for stronger institutional support, professional development opportunities, and adequate resource provision.

Responses:

“Kulang sa training at materials kaya nahihirapan kami.”

(There is a lack of training and materials, making it difficult for us.)

“Mahirap pagsabayin ang iba't ibang grade level lalo na kung kulang sa gamit.”

(It is difficult to handle different grade levels simultaneously, especially with limited materials.)

“Kami lang ang gumagawa ng paraan kahit kulang ang suporta.”

(We are the ones finding ways despite the lack of support.)

“Napapagod din kasi sabay-sabay ang preparation para sa iba't ibang level.”

(It is exhausting because preparation is done simultaneously for different levels.)

These findings highlight the systemic and structural barriers that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. The lack of training suggests a gap between policy and practice, where teachers are expected to implement inclusive strategies without adequate preparation.

This aligns with broader educational challenges in developing contexts, where resource limitations and institutional constraints impact teaching quality. The findings underscore the need for policy reforms that prioritize teacher support, including continuous professional development, provision of teaching materials, and workload management.

Moreover, the resilience demonstrated by teachers reflects their commitment to inclusive education despite these challenges. However, relying solely on teacher resilience is not sustainable; systemic interventions are necessary to ensure long-term effectiveness and equity in education.

Synthesis of Findings

Across all themes, the study reveals that inclusive education in multigrade classrooms is a dynamic interplay between teacher agency and systemic conditions. While teachers demonstrate adaptability, creativity, and commitment through differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and contextualized teaching, their efforts are constrained by structural limitations.

The findings emphasize that achieving inclusive education requires not only effective classroom practices but also strong institutional and policy support systems.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that inclusive education in multigrade classrooms is shaped by teachers' adaptive pedagogical practices, collaborative learning strategies, and contextualized instruction. Teachers play a pivotal role in creating inclusive learning environments despite significant systemic challenges. However, the effectiveness of inclusive education is constrained by limited resources, inadequate training, and structural limitations. Strengthening institutional support and professional development is essential to sustain inclusive practices in multigrade settings.

Recommendations

Strengthening inclusive education in multigrade classrooms requires a comprehensive and sustained approach that prioritizes both teacher capacity and systemic support. First, there is a critical need to strengthen teacher training on inclusive and differentiated instruction through continuous professional development programs that equip educators with practical strategies for addressing diverse learner needs. In addition, providing adequate instructional materials and resources is essential to support effective lesson delivery and reduce the

burden on teachers who often rely on improvised tools. Equally important is the enhancement of institutional and administrative support, including school leadership, policy implementation, and resource allocation, to create an enabling environment for inclusive practices. Furthermore, promoting contextualized and culturally responsive teaching should be emphasized to ensure that instruction remains relevant, meaningful, and reflective of learners' lived experiences. Finally, future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches to generate more comprehensive and evidence-based insights into inclusive education, allowing for the integration of both qualitative depth and quantitative validation to inform policy and practice.

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