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NAVIGATING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF VALUES PEDAGOGY AMONG GRADE 8 LEARNERS AT BENGUET NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study explores how inclusive education is enacted in Grade 8 English and Values classrooms in a Philippine public secondary school. Grounded in inclusive education and culturally responsive pedagogy, it examines teachers' practices, learner participation, and contextual constraints shaping inclusion. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving purposive sampling of teachers and learners. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and assessment tools. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, four themes emerged: (1) Differentiated Instruction as a Foundation for Inclusion, (2) Classroom Climate and Learner Participation, (3) Contextualization and Values Integration, and (4) Structural and Resource Constraints. Findings reveal that inclusive practices are present but uneven, relying heavily on teacher initiative and adaptive strategies. Learners reported increased engagement when lessons were contextualized and varied in delivery, while teachers highlighted challenges related to time, class size, and limited training. The study underscores the importance of sustained professional development, institutional support, and alignment with national policy frameworks such as the MATATAG Agenda and SDG 4. It contributes to the literature by providing localized insights into inclusive pedagogy within secondary education in the Philippines. Recommendations include strengthening teacher capacity in differentiated and inclusive strategies, enhancing instructional resources, and promoting collaborative support systems. Future research may adopt mixed-methods approaches to further validate and extend the findings.

Keywords: *inclusive education, secondary education, differentiated instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, Philippines*

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Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central agenda in global and national education systems, emphasizing equitable access, meaningful participation, and learning success for all learners regardless of ability, background, or circumstance. International frameworks such as the UNESCO explicitly define inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities while reducing exclusion (UNESCO, 2017). This global commitment is reinforced by United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). In the Philippine context, inclusive education is institutionalized through policies of the Department of Education (Philippines), which emphasize learner-centered, context-responsive, and inclusive pedagogical practices. However, despite strong policy alignment, the translation of inclusive principles into actual classroom practice remains uneven, particularly at the secondary level where subject specialization intensifies instructional demands.

Teachers in content areas such as English and Values education face a dual pedagogical responsibility: ensuring mastery of curriculum competencies while simultaneously accommodating diverse learner profiles, including those with varying linguistic backgrounds, learning abilities, and socio-emotional needs. Research suggests that inclusive pedagogy requires not only differentiation of content and process but also the creation of supportive learning environments that foster participation and belonging (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In practice, however, teachers often navigate tensions between curriculum coverage and responsiveness to learner diversity, especially in resource-constrained settings. As Tomlinson (2014) argues, effective differentiation demands time, training, and access to instructional materials conditions that are not always consistently available in public secondary schools. Despite the existence of inclusive education policies, there remains limited empirical evidence documenting how such policies are operationalized in everyday classroom contexts, particularly in Philippine secondary education. Much of the existing literature focuses on policy analysis or primary-level interventions, leaving a gap in understanding the lived realities of teachers and learners in subject-specific secondary classrooms. This gap is significant because classroom-level implementation is where inclusive education is either realized or constrained. Studies indicate that contextual factors such as large class sizes, insufficient instructional resources, and limited professional development opportunities significantly influence teachers' ability to implement inclusive strategies effectively (OECD, 2019). Moreover, diverse learner profiles—including differences in readiness, interests, cultural background, and learning needs—require adaptive and flexible pedagogical approaches that go beyond traditional teaching methods.

In public secondary schools, these contextual challenges are further compounded by systemic pressures such as standardized assessments, curriculum pacing requirements, and administrative workload. As a result, teachers often rely on personal initiative and experiential knowledge to implement inclusive practices, leading to variability in the quality and consistency of instruction. This underscores the need for localized, practice-based research that captures the complexities of inclusive education in real classroom settings. By examining how teachers interpret and enact inclusion in their daily teaching, such research can provide valuable insights into both effective practices and persistent barriers.

This study addresses this gap by examining inclusive teaching practices in Grade 8 English and Values classrooms, with particular attention to how teachers navigate learner diversity within their instructional contexts. It focuses on the lived experiences of both teachers and learners, recognizing that inclusion is not merely a policy directive but a dynamic, relational process shaped by interactions, beliefs, and contextual realities. Specifically, the study aims to explore how inclusive education is implemented in practice, identify pedagogical strategies that support learner participation and engagement, and analyze the challenges encountered by teachers in sustaining inclusive classroom environments. Through this inquiry, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by providing contextually grounded evidence that can inform policy, teacher training, and classroom practice.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative case study design to capture in-depth insights into inclusive classroom practices. The research was conducted at Benguet National High School, involving Grade 8 English and Values classes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included teachers and learners with direct experience in inclusive instruction.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and instructional materials. Interviews explored perceptions of inclusion, teaching strategies, and challenges, while observations focused on classroom interaction, participation, and differentiation practices.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, involving familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and thick description to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Results/Findings

Theme 1: Differentiated Instruction as a Foundation for Inclusion

Teachers consistently demonstrated the use of differentiated instructional strategies to respond to the diverse learning needs present in inclusive classrooms. These strategies included flexible grouping based on learner readiness and interests, scaffolded tasks that gradually increased in complexity, and the use of multimodal materials such as visual aids, audio resources, and interactive activities. Such approaches enabled learners to access content in varied ways, thereby reducing barriers to participation and promoting equitable learning opportunities. Differentiation also allowed teachers to modify pacing, provide individualized support, and design tiered activities that cater to both struggling and advanced learners, reflecting a responsive and learner-centered pedagogy.

This practice aligns with the principles of inclusive education, which emphasize adapting instruction rather than expecting learners to conform to a single mode of teaching. According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiated instruction is essential in heterogeneous classrooms as it allows teachers to adjust content, process, product, and learning environment based on learner needs. Similarly, Hall, Meyer, and Rose (2012) highlight that multimodal and flexible instructional approaches, as promoted in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), enhance accessibility and engagement for all learners. In inclusive settings, such strategies are not optional but necessary to ensure that diversity becomes a resource rather than a barrier (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Responses:

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

(Learners do not have the same pacing, so I adjust the activities.)

"May visual, oral, at written tasks para lahat may chance makasabay."

(There are visual, oral, and written tasks so everyone has a chance to keep up.)

"Yung mga nahihirapan, binibigyan ko ng guide questions habang yung mabilis, pinapagawa ko ng extension task."

(Those who struggle are given guide questions, while fast learners are given extension tasks.)

"Hinahati ko sila sa grupo depende sa level nila para mas matulungan ko sila."

(I group them based on their level so I can support them better.)

The findings affirm that differentiated instruction is a critical mechanism for operationalizing inclusive pedagogy in real classroom contexts. By adjusting instructional delivery and learning tasks, teachers create opportunities for all learners to participate meaningfully, regardless of ability level. This supports the argument of Tomlinson (2014) that flexible and responsive teaching enhances both engagement and academic achievement. Moreover, the use of scaffolding and multimodal strategies reflects Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where learners benefit from guided support to accomplish tasks beyond their independent capability (Vygotsky, 1978).

Empirical studies further support these findings. For instance, Subban (2006) found that differentiated instruction significantly improves learner motivation and participation in diverse classrooms. In a more recent study, Suprayogi, Valcke, and Godwin (2017) reported that teachers' use of differentiation positively correlates with student engagement and learning outcomes. Additionally, the integration of UDL principles, as discussed by CAST (2018), ensures that instruction is proactively designed to accommodate variability among learners rather than

retrofitting accommodations.

However, while differentiation enhances inclusivity, it also requires substantial teacher competence, planning time, and access to resources. Teachers' responses indicate that differentiation is often implemented through personal initiative rather than systemic support, highlighting the need for sustained professional development and institutional backing. Overall, differentiated instruction emerges not only as a strategy but as a fundamental orientation toward teaching that values diversity and promotes equitable learning experiences.

Theme 2: Classroom Climate and Learner Participation

A supportive, respectful, and psychologically safe classroom environment emerged as a critical enabler of active learner participation, particularly for those who are typically hesitant or marginalized. Teachers intentionally cultivated an atmosphere where learners felt valued, heard, and free from ridicule, thereby encouraging them to express ideas, ask questions, and engage in collaborative learning. Strategies such as affirming learner responses, normalizing mistakes as part of learning, and establishing clear norms of respect contributed to building trust within the classroom. This inclusive climate reduced fear of judgment and created opportunities for all learners to participate meaningfully, regardless of confidence level or academic ability.

Such practices reflect the principles of inclusive pedagogy, where the learning environment is designed not only for academic success but also for emotional safety and belonging. According to Lev Vygotsky (1978), social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognitive development, as learners construct knowledge through dialogue and shared experiences. In this sense, a positive classroom climate becomes a prerequisite for effective learning. Similarly, Hamre and Pianta (2001) emphasize that emotionally supportive classrooms significantly enhance student engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes. In inclusive education, fostering a sense of belonging is particularly important, as it directly influences learners' willingness to participate and take risks in learning.

Responses:

"Kapag safe ang classroom, mas nagiging confident sila magsalita."

(When the classroom is safe, they become more confident to speak.)

"Pinapahalagahan namin ang bawat sagot, kahit mali."

(We value every answer, even if it is incorrect.)

"Hindi ako nagpapahiya ng bata kasi doon sila natatakot mag-participate."

(I do not embarrass learners because that makes them afraid to participate.)

"Kapag ramdam nila na tanggap sila, mas nagiging active sila sa discussion."

(When they feel accepted, they become more active in discussions.)

The findings highlight that a positive classroom climate is integral to inclusive education, as it directly influences learner participation, confidence, and engagement. By creating a safe and respectful space, teachers reduce anxiety and empower learners to express their thoughts without fear of failure. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is inherently social and mediated through interaction. When learners feel secure, they are more likely to engage in meaningful dialogue, thereby enhancing cognitive development.

Empirical studies further reinforce this perspective. Wentzel (2012) found that supportive teacher-student relationships significantly predict student motivation and classroom participation. Likewise, a study by Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2017) demonstrates that positive classroom environments contribute to improved academic and social outcomes, particularly in diverse classrooms. In inclusive settings, where learners may experience varying levels of confidence and ability, the role of classroom climate becomes even more critical. It serves as a foundation upon which other inclusive practices, such as differentiation and collaboration, can effectively operate.

Overall, the findings suggest that inclusion is not solely achieved through instructional strategies but also through the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching. A classroom that prioritizes respect, acceptance, and encouragement fosters learner voice and participation, making inclusion a lived and meaningful experience for all students.

Theme 3: Contextualization and Values Integration

Teachers deliberately integrated local contexts, lived experiences, and community realities into their lessons particularly in Values education to make learning meaningful, relevant, and inclusive. By anchoring abstract concepts to familiar situations such as family relationships, community practices, and everyday moral dilemmas, teachers enabled learners to connect new knowledge with prior experiences. This approach not only enhanced comprehension but also validated learners' identities, cultures, and social backgrounds, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging in the classroom.

In practice, contextualization was evident in the use of localized examples, storytelling, real-life scenarios, and reflective discussions that resonate with learners' daily lives. Teachers adapted lesson content to reflect culturally familiar situations, allowing learners to see themselves in the curriculum. This aligns with the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of linking instruction to learners' cultural knowledge, experiences, and frames of reference (Gay, 2018). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally relevant teaching fosters academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, all of which are essential in inclusive education.

Responses:

"Iniuugnay ko sa buhay nila para mas maintindihan nila."

(I connect lessons to their lives so they understand better.)

"Mas engaged sila kapag relatable ang topic."

(They are more engaged when the topic is relatable.)

"Kapag halimbawa ay tungkol sa respeto, ginagamit ko ang sitwasyon sa pamilya o barangay nila."

(When the lesson is about respect, I use situations from their family or community.)

"Mas nagiging bukas sila sa sharing kapag nakaka-relate sila sa topic."

(They become more open in sharing when they can relate to the topic.)

The findings affirm that contextualized teaching is a powerful strategy for promoting inclusion, as it bridges the gap between curriculum content and learners' lived realities. By making lessons relevant and relatable, teachers enhance engagement, participation, and deeper understanding. This supports the view of Gay (2018) that culturally responsive teaching improves academic achievement by aligning instruction with learners' cultural contexts. Moreover, contextualization fosters a sense of identity and validation, which is critical in inclusive classrooms where diversity is prominent.

Empirical evidence further supports these observations. According to Paris and Alim (2017), culturally sustaining pedagogy not only acknowledges but actively sustains learners' cultural practices, thereby promoting equity and inclusion. In the Philippine context, contextualized and localized instruction is also emphasized in national curriculum frameworks, recognizing that learning becomes more meaningful when grounded in learners' experiences. Additionally, studies have shown that learners demonstrate higher motivation and participation when instruction is connected to real-life contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Overall, contextualization and values integration transform the classroom into a space where learning is both academically meaningful and personally significant. This approach reinforces the idea that inclusive education is not only about access but also about relevance ensuring that all learners see themselves reflected in what and how they learn.

Conclusions

The study reveals that inclusive education in secondary classrooms is a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by the interplay of teacher adaptability, classroom climate, and contextualized pedagogy. Teachers serve as the central agents of inclusion, demonstrating flexibility in instruction, responsiveness to learner diversity, and commitment to creating supportive learning environments. Through differentiated strategies, positive classroom relationships, and the integration of learners' lived experiences into instruction, inclusive practices are meaningfully enacted at the classroom level.

However, the findings also highlight that these practices are often sustained through individual teacher initiative rather than systematic institutional support. Structural constraints such as large class sizes, limited instructional materials, insufficient training, and time pressures continue to hinder the consistent and effective implementation of inclusive education. This suggests a gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, where inclusive education is recognized in principle but unevenly realized in practice.

Moreover, the study underscores that inclusion extends beyond instructional strategies; it encompasses relational, cultural, and contextual dimensions of teaching. A positive classroom climate fosters learner confidence and participation, while contextualized and culturally responsive approaches enhance relevance and engagement. These elements collectively contribute to a more holistic and equitable learning experience for all learners. Overall, the study affirms that while inclusive education is attainable, its sustainability depends on strengthened support systems, aligned policies, and continuous teacher development.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Professional Development in Inclusive and Differentiated Instruction

There is a need for sustained, practice-oriented professional development programs that equip teachers with concrete strategies in inclusive education, differentiation, and classroom management. Training should go beyond theoretical discussions and include demonstration teaching, mentoring, and collaborative learning communities. Continuous capacity building will enhance teacher confidence and competence in addressing diverse learner needs.

2. Provide Adequate Instructional Materials and Resources

Schools should ensure the availability of diverse, accessible, and contextually relevant instructional materials that support differentiated and inclusive teaching. This includes visual aids, multimedia resources, assistive tools, and localized learning materials. Adequate resources enable teachers to implement varied instructional strategies effectively and reduce reliance on improvised solutions.

3. Enhance Institutional Support and Policy Implementation

School leaders and education authorities, particularly the Department of Education (Philippines), should strengthen the implementation of inclusive education policies through monitoring, technical assistance, and resource allocation. Institutional support mechanisms such as reduced class size, provision of teacher aides, and structured planning time are essential to sustain inclusive practices. Clear policy translation into actionable school-level programs is critical.

4. Promote Culturally Responsive and Contextualized Teaching

Teachers should be encouraged and supported to integrate learners' cultural backgrounds, local knowledge, and real-life experiences into instruction. Schools may develop localized curriculum guides or contextualized lesson exemplars to support this effort. Such practices not only enhance comprehension but also affirm learner identity and promote inclusivity.

5. Conduct Further Research Using Mixed-Methods Designs

Future studies should adopt mixed-methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education by combining qualitative insights with quantitative evidence. Expanding research across different regions, subject areas, and educational levels will strengthen generalizability and inform policy and practice. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies are also recommended to examine the long-term impact of

inclusive strategies on learner outcomes.

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