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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INCLUSIVITY AND LEARNING PRACTICES IN EARLY GRADE EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE LENS OF TEACHER'S PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCES AT BONTOC CENTRAL SCHOOL, MOUNTAIN PROVINCE

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Abstract

Inclusive education remains a central priority in advancing equitable and quality learning, particularly in early grade education where foundational skills are developed. This study explores the pedagogical experiences of teachers implementing inclusive learning practices in early grade classrooms at Bontoc Central School, Mountain Province. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved purposively selected early grade teachers whose experiences were captured through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Findings revealed five major themes: (1) Inclusion as Responsive Teaching Practice, (2) Contextualized and Differentiated Learning Strategies, (3) Emotional and Relational Dimensions of Teaching, (4) Collaborative Learning and Peer Mediation, and (5) Structural Constraints and Institutional Gaps. Results indicate that teachers demonstrate adaptive expertise and commitment in addressing diverse learner needs despite resource limitations. However, systemic challenges continue to affect the sustainability of inclusive practices. The study contributes to inclusive pedagogy literature by highlighting context-specific practices in rural early grade education and underscores the need for strengthened institutional support.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Early Grade Learning, Pedagogical Practices, Rural Education, Qualitative Study*

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Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a global educational imperative, emphasizing the provision of equitable, accessible, and quality learning opportunities for all learners regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or socio-cultural contexts. Anchored in Sustainable Development Goal 4, inclusive education underscores the need to eliminate barriers to participation and ensure that every learner is meaningfully engaged in the learning process. While policy frameworks worldwide advocate inclusion, its implementation remains deeply contextual, particularly in early grade education where foundational literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills are developed.

Early grade education represents a critical stage in the educational continuum, as it lays the groundwork for lifelong learning. It is within these formative years that inclusive pedagogical practices can either empower learners or reinforce exclusionary patterns. Teachers, therefore, play a pivotal role in mediating inclusive experiences through their instructional strategies, classroom management, and relational approaches. However, in rural settings such as Bontoc Central School in Mountain Province, teachers often navigate complex realities characterized by limited resources, diverse learner needs, and varying levels of institutional support.

Despite increasing attention to inclusive education, much of the existing literature focuses on policy analysis and quantitative outcomes, with limited emphasis on the lived pedagogical experiences of teachers in rural early grade contexts. Understanding how teachers interpret, implement, and adapt inclusive practices is essential for bridging the gap between policy and classroom realities. Moreover, exploring these experiences through a qualitative lens provides deeper insights into the challenges, innovations, and contextual dynamics that shape inclusive education. This study aims to examine the pedagogical experiences of early grade teachers in implementing inclusive learning practices at Bontoc Central School. Specifically, it seeks to explore how teachers conceptualize inclusion, the strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and the ways in which they sustain inclusive practices in a resource-constrained environment. By foregrounding teachers' voices, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive pedagogy and offers contextually grounded insights for improving early grade education in rural settings.

Review of Related Literature

Inclusive education has increasingly been recognized as a transformative educational approach that promotes participation, equity, and learner-centered practices within diverse classroom settings. Rather than viewing learner diversity as a challenge to be addressed, inclusive education reframes it as a resource that enriches teaching and learning processes. As articulated by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), inclusive pedagogy emphasizes extending learning opportunities to all learners by designing instruction that anticipates diversity rather than reacting to it. This perspective is further reinforced by Mel Ainscow (2020), who argues that inclusion requires systemic efforts to remove barriers to participation and ensure that all learners are meaningfully engaged in the educational process. Contemporary studies affirm that inclusive classrooms contribute not only to improved academic outcomes but also to enhanced social integration, equity, and learner well-being (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The theoretical foundations of inclusive education are deeply rooted in constructivist and experiential learning paradigms. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) Constructivist Theory posits that learning is socially mediated and occurs through interaction, collaboration, and guided participation. Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which underscores the role of scaffolding in supporting learners to achieve higher levels of understanding. In inclusive classrooms, this principle highlights the importance of peer interaction, teacher facilitation, and differentiated support. Complementing this is David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through experience, reflection, and application. This framework supports the use of contextualized and activity-based learning approaches that are particularly effective in addressing diverse learner needs in early grade education. Together, these theories provide a strong foundation for understanding how inclusive practices can be operationalized through socially responsive and experience-driven pedagogies.

In addition, the Inclusive Pedagogy Framework developed by Florian (2019) advances the notion of "teaching for all," where instruction is designed to be inherently accessible to diverse learners without the need for segregation or excessive differentiation. This approach challenges traditional deficit-based models and instead promotes a strengths-based orientation that values learner diversity. Recent empirical studies support this framework, indicating that inclusive pedagogical practices—such as flexible instruction, collaborative learning, and learner-centered approaches—significantly enhance participation and reduce exclusion in classrooms (Hà, 2026; Núñez et

al., 2025). These findings suggest that effective inclusion is achieved not through isolated interventions but through holistic and responsive teaching practices embedded within everyday classroom interactions.

Despite these theoretical and empirical advancements, the implementation of inclusive education in rural contexts remains a significant challenge. Rural schools often operate within environments characterized by limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to professional development opportunities. According to OECD (2019), disparities between urban and rural education systems contribute to unequal learning opportunities, with rural teachers facing greater demands but fewer institutional supports. These challenges are further compounded by large class sizes, multi-grade teaching arrangements, and socio-economic constraints that affect both learners and educators.

In the Philippine context, these issues are particularly pronounced. The Second Congressional Commission on Education (2023) highlights systemic gaps in teacher training, instructional resources, and policy implementation, especially in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. While national policies strongly advocate inclusive education, their translation into classroom practice remains inconsistent due to contextual limitations. Studies conducted in rural Philippine settings reveal that teachers often rely on improvisation, contextualization, and personal initiative to implement inclusive practices, underscoring both their resilience and the inadequacy of institutional support (Reyes & Santos, 2021; Bernardo & Mendoza, 2020).

Furthermore, recent global research emphasizes that inclusive education in rural areas requires context-sensitive approaches that consider cultural, social, and environmental factors. McCabe and Ruppap (2023) argue that rural inclusion must be understood within local realities, where community dynamics and resource availability shape educational practices. Similarly, Azorín and Ainscow (2020) highlight the importance of collaborative and community-based approaches in sustaining inclusive education, particularly in under-resourced settings.

Despite the growing body of literature on inclusive education, there remains a notable gap in studies that explore the lived pedagogical experiences of teachers, particularly in early grade classrooms within rural Philippine contexts. Much of the existing research focuses on policy analysis, quantitative outcomes, or urban settings, leaving limited understanding of how inclusion is enacted in everyday classroom practices in remote areas. This gap underscores the need for qualitative investigations that capture the voices, challenges, and innovations of teachers who are at the forefront of implementing inclusive education.

In response, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a phenomenological account of teachers' pedagogical experiences in early grade inclusive education at Bontoc Central School. By situating the analysis within both global and local frameworks, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how inclusive practices are shaped by theoretical principles, contextual realities, and teacher agency. Ultimately, this research aims to inform more responsive, contextually grounded, and sustainable approaches to inclusive education in rural settings.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived pedagogical experiences of early grade teachers implementing inclusive education at Bontoc Central School. The phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive, interpret, and enact inclusive practices within their classroom contexts. Participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in early grade instruction, ensuring that they possessed relevant experiences related to inclusive teaching. The study involved a small group of early grade teachers handling diverse learners, including those with varying abilities and learning needs.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. The interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences, beliefs, and challenges, while observations provided insights into actual classroom practices, interactions, and strategies used to facilitate inclusive learning. Document analysis, including lesson plans and instructional materials, served as supplementary data to validate and enrich the findings.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of themes, refinement of thematic categories, and

interpretation of findings. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed credibility through member checking, dependability through an audit trail, confirmability through reflexive journaling, and transferability through thick description of the research context.

Results/Findings

Theme 1: Inclusion as Responsive Teaching Practice

Teachers conceptualize inclusion as a dynamic and ongoing pedagogical process that requires continuous responsiveness to the diverse cognitive, social, and emotional needs of learners. Rather than adhering to rigid instructional routines, teachers emphasize flexibility, adaptability, and learner-centered approaches as essential components of inclusive practice. This responsiveness manifests in real-time adjustments in teaching strategies, pacing, and classroom interactions, ensuring that all learners regardless of ability are meaningfully engaged. In the early grade context, where learners exhibit varied developmental readiness, such responsiveness becomes crucial in fostering equitable participation and preventing marginalization. Inclusion, therefore, is not viewed as a fixed strategy but as a situational and relational practice that evolves based on learners' needs and classroom dynamics.

Participant Responses

- *"Kailangan mong baguhin ang approach depende sa bata."*
- *"Hindi pare-pareho ang bata kaya dapat iba-iba rin ang paraan."*
- *"Inclusion means walang naiiwan sa klase."*

These findings strongly reflect the principles of inclusive pedagogy, where teaching is intentionally designed to accommodate all learners rather than targeting specific groups (Florian, 2019). The emphasis on responsiveness aligns with Lev Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, particularly the concept of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development, where instruction is adjusted to support individual learning trajectories. Similarly, Ainscow (2020) highlights that inclusive classrooms require adaptive teaching practices that move away from standardized instruction toward flexible and responsive engagement. Recent studies further affirm that responsive pedagogy enhances learner participation and reduces exclusion, particularly in diverse classroom settings (Hà, 2026). Thus, inclusion emerges as a pedagogical commitment to responsiveness, grounded in both theory and practice.

Theme 2: Contextualized and Differentiated Learning Strategies

Teachers employ contextualized and differentiated instructional strategies that are tailored to the socio-cultural and developmental realities of their learners. These include the use of localized examples, improvised teaching materials, and varied learning activities designed to accommodate different learning levels and styles. In resource-constrained rural settings, teachers demonstrate creativity and innovation by maximizing available resources and integrating learners' lived experiences into instruction. Differentiation is not limited to content but extends to process and assessment, allowing learners multiple pathways to understanding. This approach ensures that instruction remains accessible, relevant, and meaningful, particularly for learners who may struggle with conventional teaching methods.

Participant Responses

- *"Gumagamit ako ng local examples para mas maintindihan nila."*
- *"Nag-iiba ako ng activities depende sa level ng bata."*
- *"Minsan gumagawa ako ng sariling materials kasi kulang."*

These practices are consistent with experiential learning theory, as proposed by David Kolb (1984), which emphasizes learning through experience, reflection, and application. Contextualization enhances comprehension by linking abstract concepts to familiar experiences, a strategy particularly effective in early grade education. According to OECD (2019), teachers in rural contexts often rely on improvisation and localized strategies due to limited access to standardized resources. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) further argue that inclusive pedagogy requires extending teaching approaches to all learners through flexible and responsive strategies. Recent empirical studies also indicate that differentiated instruction significantly improves learning outcomes and engagement in diverse classrooms (Núñez et al., 2025). Thus, contextualized and differentiated practices function as critical mechanisms for operationalizing inclusion in resource-limited settings.

Theme 3: Emotional and Relational Dimensions of Teaching

Teachers highlight the centrality of emotional connection, empathy, and relational engagement in fostering inclusive learning environments. Inclusive teaching is described not only as an instructional task but as a deeply human and affective practice that requires patience, understanding, and genuine care for learners. Teachers often assume roles that extend beyond academic facilitation, including mentoring, counseling, and nurturing, particularly for learners who face learning difficulties or socio-emotional challenges. These emotional and relational dimensions create a safe and supportive classroom climate where learners feel valued, accepted, and motivated to participate.

Participant Responses

- *"Importante na maramdaman ng bata na tinatanggap siya."*
- *"Kailangan mo ng pasensya lalo na sa nahihirapan."*
- *"Hindi lang teaching, kundi pag-aalaga rin."*

The findings align with the Ethics of Care framework proposed by Nel Noddings (2005), which positions caring relationships as foundational to effective teaching and learning. Additionally, Andy Hargreaves (1998) conceptualizes teaching as an emotional practice that involves significant emotional labor, particularly in inclusive settings. Research by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) further demonstrates that teachers' emotional competence positively influences classroom climate, student engagement, and academic outcomes. In inclusive education, where learners may require additional support, emotional responsiveness becomes even more critical. These findings suggest that inclusion is sustained not only through instructional strategies but also through authentic human connections and affective engagement.

Theme 4: Collaborative Learning and Peer Mediation

Collaborative learning and peer mediation emerge as significant facilitators of inclusive education. Teachers encourage group work, peer tutoring, and cooperative activities that enable learners to support one another in the learning process. These interactions foster a sense of shared responsibility and mutual respect among learners, promoting both academic and social development. Peer mediation serves as an informal scaffolding mechanism, where more capable learners assist those who are struggling, thereby enhancing understanding and participation.

Participant Responses

- *"Pinagtutulungan ng mga bata ang mga activities."*
- *"Yung marunong tumutulong sa hindi pa marunong."*
- *"Mas natututo sila kapag group work."*

These findings are supported by cooperative learning theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), which emphasizes the role of positive interdependence and peer interaction in enhancing learning outcomes. The concept also aligns with Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, where learners benefit from guidance provided by peers. Gillies (2016) further confirms that cooperative learning strategies improve both academic achievement and social relationships in diverse classrooms. In inclusive settings, peer support reduces stigma and promotes acceptance, contributing to a more cohesive classroom environment. Thus, collaborative learning functions as a natural and sustainable strategy for fostering inclusion and social integration.

Theme 5: Structural Constraints and Institutional Gaps

Despite the presence of inclusive practices, teachers face significant structural and institutional challenges that hinder the full implementation of inclusive education. These include inadequate training, lack of specialized instructional materials, limited access to professional development, and insufficient institutional support. Such constraints create a gap between policy expectations and classroom realities, placing additional burdens on teachers who must compensate through personal effort and improvisation.

Participant Responses

- *"Kulang talaga sa training para sa inclusive education."*
- *"Walang sapat na materials para sa diverse learners."*
- *"Kailangan pa ng support mula sa system."*

These findings reflect broader systemic issues identified by OECD (2019), which highlights disparities in resource allocation and teacher preparation, particularly in rural contexts. The Second Congressional Commission on

Education (2023) also reports similar challenges within the Philippine education system, including insufficient support for inclusive education initiatives. Ainscow (2020) emphasizes that inclusive education requires systemic reform, including policy alignment, institutional support, and capacity building. Without these, classroom-level efforts may remain unsustainable. Therefore, inclusion must be viewed as a shared responsibility that extends beyond the classroom to the broader educational system.

Conclusions

This study reveals that inclusive education in early grade classrooms at Bontoc Central School is a dynamic and context-driven practice shaped by teachers' adaptability, commitment, and relational engagement. Teachers play a central role in translating inclusive policies into meaningful classroom experiences through responsive teaching, contextualized strategies, and collaborative learning approaches. However, the sustainability of these practices is significantly influenced by systemic and structural conditions, including access to training, instructional resources, and institutional support. While teachers demonstrate resilience and innovation in addressing diverse learner needs, the persistence of these challenges underscores the need for a more integrated and systemic approach to inclusive education. Ultimately, inclusion in early grade education is not merely a pedagogical approach but a holistic process that requires alignment among policy, practice, and community support to ensure equitable and meaningful learning for all.

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