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Learner-Centered and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Early Elementary Education: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices employed by Grade 2 teachers in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. Anchored on Constructivist Theory and Inclusive Pedagogy, the study examined how teachers facilitate meaningful learning experiences, address diverse learner needs, and foster inclusive classroom participation in early elementary education. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving six Grade 2 teachers from selected public elementary schools in Nueva Vizcaya. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework revealed four major themes: (1) contextualized and learner-responsive instruction, (2) collaborative and participatory classroom engagement, (3) differentiated and inclusive learning support, and (4) challenges in sustaining inclusive pedagogy. Findings showed that teachers employed localized examples, differentiated activities, peer collaboration, formative assessment, and flexible instructional approaches to support diverse learners. Teachers emphasized emotional support, encouragement, and adaptive teaching strategies to promote participation and learner confidence. However, insufficient instructional materials, large class sizes, limited professional training, and time constraints emerged as major barriers to sustaining inclusive practices. The study highlights the importance of strengthening teacher professional development, institutional support, and inclusive learning resources to enhance equitable and learner-centered education in early elementary classrooms. The findings contribute to the growing discourse on inclusive pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching in Philippine basic education.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, inclusive education, Grade 2 learners, qualitative research, early elementary education, Philippines

Introduction

The increasing diversity of learners in contemporary classrooms has intensified the need for learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices in basic education. In early elementary education, particularly in Grade 2 classrooms, teachers play a crucial role in shaping learners' academic, emotional, and social development through meaningful and responsive instructional approaches. Learner-centered pedagogy emphasizes active participation, experiential learning, collaboration, and the recognition of individual learner differences, while inclusive pedagogy seeks to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities regardless of learners' abilities, backgrounds, or needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). These approaches have become increasingly relevant in the Philippine educational context where classrooms are characterized by linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and developmental diversity.

The Department of Education in the Philippines continues to strengthen inclusive and learner-centered educational reforms through the K-12 curriculum and inclusive education policies. These reforms emphasize contextualized instruction, differentiated teaching, and learner participation to improve educational outcomes and address equity gaps. However, despite these policy directions, many elementary teachers continue to encounter challenges in implementing inclusive and learner-centered strategies due to limited resources, insufficient training, overcrowded classrooms, and varied learner needs. In rural and semi-rural provinces such as Nueva Vizcaya, these challenges become more pronounced because of contextual constraints affecting instructional delivery and classroom management.

Existing studies have emphasized the importance of learner-centered teaching in promoting engagement, comprehension, and collaborative learning among elementary learners (Gay, 2018; Florian, 2019). Similarly, inclusive pedagogical practices have been associated with improved learner participation, positive classroom relationships, and enhanced social-emotional development. Nonetheless, there remains limited qualitative literature examining how Grade 2 teachers in Philippine public schools operationalize learner-centered and inclusive pedagogy within actual classroom settings. Much of the available literature focuses on policy implementation and quantitative assessments rather than teachers' lived instructional experiences and classroom realities.

Furthermore, the early elementary years represent a critical stage in developing foundational literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional competencies. Grade 2 learners require instructional environments that are responsive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate. Understanding how teachers navigate learner diversity and implement inclusive practices can provide valuable insights into improving instructional quality and supporting equitable education in primary schools. This study explored the learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices employed by Grade 2 teachers in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. Specifically, it examined teachers' instructional approaches, classroom engagement strategies, inclusion practices, and implementation challenges. The findings of the study may contribute to the enhancement of teacher preparation programs, inclusive education initiatives, and professional development interventions in Philippine elementary education.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Constructivist Theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky and the Inclusive Pedagogy Framework developed by Lani Florian and Kristine Black-Hawkins.

Constructivist Theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction, collaboration, and meaningful experiences. Learning becomes more effective when teachers facilitate active participation, scaffold instruction, and connect lessons to learners' real-life experiences. In Grade 2 classrooms, learner-centered activities such as collaborative learning, peer interaction, storytelling, and contextualized instruction support children's cognitive and social development.

Inclusive Pedagogy emphasizes extending learning opportunities to all learners rather than creating separate approaches for those perceived as different. It promotes flexible teaching methods, differentiated instruction, learner participation, and recognition of diversity within mainstream classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to create supportive learning environments that accommodate varying abilities, interests, and learning needs while maintaining high expectations for all learners.

These theories guided the exploration of how Grade 2 teachers implement learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices in early elementary classrooms.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices of Grade 2 teachers in Nueva Vizcaya. Qualitative research enabled the researchers to obtain in-depth descriptions of teachers' instructional experiences, classroom strategies, and perceptions regarding inclusive teaching practices.

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in selected public elementary schools in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. The participants consisted of six Grade 2 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on their teaching experience, classroom involvement, and willingness to participate in the study.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were gathered through:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Non-participant classroom observations
- Document analysis of lesson plans and instructional materials

The interview guide focused on instructional practices, learner engagement, inclusion strategies, and teaching challenges.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was secured from school administrators. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data gathering. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, while classroom observations and document reviews were conducted to triangulate findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. The analysis involved familiarization with data, coding, theme generation, theme review, and interpretation.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility was established through member checking and triangulation of interview, observation, and document data. Dependability was ensured through audit trails and systematic documentation of procedures. Confirmability was achieved through reflective analysis and triangulation, while transferability was supported through thick descriptions of the research context and participants.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Contextualized and Learner-Responsive Instruction

Teachers emphasized the importance of adapting instruction according to learners' comprehension levels, interests, home experiences, and sociocultural backgrounds. Participants explained that Grade 2 learners understand lessons more effectively when classroom discussions are connected to familiar real-life situations and everyday experiences. Teachers believed that contextualized instruction increases learner participation, motivation, and comprehension because learners can easily relate abstract concepts to their daily lives.

One participant shared:

"Mas naiintindihan ng mga bata kapag inuunay namin sa totoong buhay ang lesson."

("Learners understand the lesson better when we relate it to real-life situations.")

Another teacher explained:

"Kapag halimbawa tungkol sa bilang o pera ang lesson, ginagamit ko iyong karanasan nila sa tindahan o sa bahay para mas makasabay sila."

("For example, when the lesson is about numbers or money, I use their experiences in stores or at home so they can follow the discussion more easily.")

Similarly, another participant stated:

"Mas nagiging interesado sila kapag nakikita nila na konektado sa buhay nila ang itinuturo."

("They become more interested when they see that the lesson is connected to their own lives.")

Teachers frequently utilized localized examples, storytelling, visual aids, songs, manipulatives, and experiential learning activities to make classroom instruction more meaningful and engaging. Lessons were contextualized using familiar community experiences, family routines, local culture, and learners' interests to enhance understanding and classroom participation. In reading activities, teachers incorporated local names, situations, and familiar objects to improve learners' comprehension and engagement.

Classroom observations revealed that teachers regularly incorporated interactive questioning, games, movement-based activities, collaborative tasks, and visual demonstrations to sustain learner attention and participation. Teachers also adjusted instructional pacing and explanations depending on learners' responses, comprehension levels, and classroom behavior. Learners who encountered difficulties were provided with additional examples, simplified instructions, and guided support to facilitate understanding.

The findings suggest that learner-responsive instruction allows teachers to become more sensitive to learners' developmental needs and learning capacities. Through contextualized teaching, learners were able to participate more actively because lessons became relatable and meaningful within their social realities. Such instructional practices created supportive learning environments where learners felt encouraged to express ideas and engage in classroom discussions.

These findings support the argument of Geneva Gay that culturally responsive and contextualized instruction strengthens learner engagement and comprehension by connecting classroom learning to learners' lived experiences. The findings also align with Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes that learners construct knowledge through meaningful experiences and social interaction.

Theme 2: Collaborative and Participatory Classroom Engagement

Teachers highlighted the significance of active participation, peer interaction, and collaborative learning in supporting Grade 2 learners' academic and social development. Participants emphasized that young learners become more motivated

and confident when they are given opportunities to interact with classmates and participate actively in classroom activities.

One participant remarked:

“Kapag nagtutulungan sila, mas nagiging confident at mas mabilis silang matuto.”

(“When they help one another, they become more confident and learn faster.”)

Another teacher shared:

“Mas masaya ang klase kapag may group activities dahil lahat gusto sumali.”

(“The class becomes more enjoyable when there are group activities because everyone wants to participate.”)

Similarly, another participant explained:

“Napapansin ko na kahit mahiyain ang bata, sumasali kapag may partner o grupo siyang kasama.”

(“I notice that even shy learners participate when they have a partner or group with them.”)

Collaborative activities such as peer tutoring, role-playing, storytelling, group work, cooperative games, and interactive classroom discussions were commonly observed during classroom observations. Teachers encouraged learners to exchange ideas, ask questions, assist classmates, and participate in shared tasks. Some teachers assigned peer partners to struggling learners to encourage participation and social interaction.

Teachers explained that collaborative activities helped learners develop communication skills, teamwork, and confidence in expressing themselves. Learners appeared more engaged and enthusiastic when classroom activities involved movement, interaction, and cooperation rather than purely lecture-based instruction. Teachers also noted that collaborative learning reduced learners' fear of making mistakes because they felt supported by their classmates.

Classroom observations further revealed that participatory teaching practices promoted positive classroom relationships and active learner engagement. Teachers facilitated inclusive discussions by encouraging all learners to contribute ideas and participate regardless of academic ability. Positive reinforcement and affirmations were frequently used to motivate learners and sustain classroom participation.

The findings revealed that collaborative learning fostered learner confidence, social interaction, classroom participation, and emotional support among peers. Teachers observed that learners became more attentive, motivated, and cooperative when actively involved in classroom activities instead of merely listening passively to lectures.

This finding aligns with Constructivist Theory, particularly the work of Lev Vygotsky, which emphasizes social interaction and collaborative engagement as essential processes in knowledge construction and learner development. Collaborative learning environments allow learners to acquire understanding through interaction, guidance, and shared experiences.

Theme 3: Differentiated and Inclusive Learning Support

Participants demonstrated conscious efforts to accommodate diverse learner needs through differentiated instruction and inclusive classroom strategies. Teachers acknowledged that Grade 2 learners possess varying abilities, learning styles, interests, and levels of comprehension, requiring flexible and adaptive teaching approaches.

One participant stated:

“May mga batang mabilis matuto at mayroon ding kailangan ng dagdag na gabay kaya kailangan flexible ang pagtuturo.”

(“Some learners learn quickly while others need additional guidance, so teaching must be flexible.”)

Another teacher shared:

“Hindi pare-pareho ang kakayahan ng mga bata kaya kailangan may ibang paraan ng pagpapaliwanag.”

(“Learners do not have the same abilities, so different ways of explaining lessons are necessary.”)

Similarly, another participant explained:

“Kapag may batang nahihirapan, inuulit ko nang dahan-dahan at binibigyan ko sila ng simpleng halimbawa.”

(“When a learner struggles, I repeat the lesson slowly and provide simpler examples.”)

Teachers modified classroom activities, simplified instructions, provided additional explanations, and utilized scaffolded learning activities to accommodate struggling learners. Visual materials, flashcards, manipulatives, differentiated worksheets, and guided practice activities were commonly used to address varying learner needs and comprehension levels.

Participants also emphasized the importance of emotional encouragement and positive reinforcement in fostering inclusive learning environments. Teachers consistently reassured learners, praised small achievements, and encouraged participation regardless of learners' academic performance.

One teacher stated:

“Importante na maramdaman nilang kaya nila para hindi sila mawalan ng gana.”

(“It is important for learners to feel that they are capable so they will not lose motivation.”)

Teachers also demonstrated inclusive classroom management practices by ensuring that learners with difficulties were not isolated or embarrassed during classroom participation. Instead, teachers created supportive environments where learners felt safe to ask questions, make mistakes, and seek assistance.

Classroom observations further revealed that teachers employed flexible seating arrangements, peer assistance, and differentiated questioning strategies to support inclusive participation. Learners who struggled academically were given additional time and individualized guidance to complete classroom tasks.

The findings reflect the principles of Inclusive Pedagogy developed by Lani Florian, which emphasize extending meaningful learning opportunities to all learners through flexible, responsive, and supportive teaching approaches rather than segregating learners based on differences. Inclusive teaching practices promoted learner participation, confidence, and equitable classroom engagement.

Theme 4: Challenges in Sustaining Inclusive Pedagogical Practices

Despite teachers' commitment to learner-centered and inclusive education, several challenges affected the consistent implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices in Grade 2 classrooms. Teachers acknowledged that structural, instructional, and resource-related limitations often constrained their ability to fully address diverse learner needs.

One participant expressed:

“Mahirap minsan dahil kulang ang materials at marami ang bata sa classroom.”
 (“It is difficult at times because instructional materials are lacking and there are too many learners in the classroom.”)

Another teacher stated:

“Minsan kulang ang oras para matutukan lahat lalo na kapag iba-iba ang pangangailangan nila.”
 (“Sometimes time is insufficient to attend to everyone, especially when learners have different needs.”)

Similarly, another participant shared:

“Kailangan pa talaga ng training tungkol sa inclusive education dahil hindi lahat ng teachers handa rito.”
 (“There is still a need for training on inclusive education because not all teachers are fully prepared for it.”)

Major challenges identified included:

- Large class sizes
- Insufficient instructional materials
- Limited teacher training on inclusive education
- Time constraints
- Diverse learner needs
- Limited classroom resources
- Heavy teacher workload

Teachers explained that overcrowded classrooms limited opportunities for individualized instruction and close monitoring of learner progress. Managing learners with varying academic abilities and behavioral needs within a limited instructional period became particularly challenging.

Participants also expressed concerns regarding inadequate access to instructional materials, assistive learning resources, and differentiated learning tools necessary for inclusive teaching. Some teachers relied on improvised materials and personal resources to support classroom instruction.

Furthermore, teachers highlighted the need for additional professional development programs focusing on differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom management, learner behavior support, and adaptive teaching strategies. Participants emphasized that continuous training and institutional support are necessary to strengthen teachers' confidence and competence in handling inclusive classrooms.

Despite these challenges, teachers remained committed to supporting learners through patience, creativity, and adaptive teaching practices. Teachers demonstrated resilience by continuously modifying strategies and finding practical ways to sustain learner participation and engagement.

These findings support studies indicating that structural and resource limitations remain significant barriers to effective inclusive education implementation in developing educational contexts. The findings further suggest that strengthening institutional support systems, providing adequate learning resources, and expanding teacher professional development initiatives are essential in promoting sustainable learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices in elementary education.

Conclusion

This study revealed that Grade 2 teachers in Nueva Vizcaya employ various learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices to support diverse learners in early elementary classrooms. Teachers utilized contextualized instruction, collaborative learning activities, differentiated strategies, and emotional support mechanisms to foster meaningful participation and learner engagement.

The findings further demonstrated that inclusive pedagogy in early elementary education extends beyond instructional modification and involves building supportive, participatory, and responsive classroom environments. Teachers' flexibility, empathy, and adaptability played crucial roles in promoting learner confidence and participation.

However, sustaining learner-centered and inclusive practices remains challenging due to insufficient resources, large class sizes, limited training opportunities, and diverse learner demands. Strengthening institutional support, providing

adequate instructional materials, and enhancing teacher professional development are essential to improving inclusive and equitable elementary education in the Philippines.

Recommendations

1. Schools should strengthen professional development programs focusing on learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical practices.
2. Teachers should be provided with adequate instructional resources and contextualized learning materials.
3. School administrators should support manageable class sizes and inclusive classroom initiatives.
4. Future researchers may conduct similar studies involving learners, parents, and administrators to obtain broader perspectives on inclusive education practices.
5. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies may also be conducted to examine the effectiveness of learner-centered strategies on academic performance and learner engagement.

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