

NAVIGATING THE CURRICULUM TO ADDRESS DIVERSE LEARNERS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF GRADE 5 TEACHERS

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Abstract. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Grade 5 teachers in navigating the curriculum while addressing diverse learners in the classroom. Anchored on inclusive education and differentiated instruction, the study aimed to understand how teachers manage individual differences, cope with related challenges, and derive educational management insights from their experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews (IDI) with ten Grade 5 teachers from selected elementary schools in Marilog South District, Davao City. Thematic analysis of the participants’ narratives revealed three major themes describing teachers’ experiences: Embracing Diversity Through Flexible Instruction, Challenges in Meeting Diverse Learning Needs, and Adapting Strategies for Inclusion and Engagement. With regard to coping mechanisms, three themes emerged: Leveraging Collaboration and Support Systems, Integrating Technology for Differentiated Learning, and Fostering Socio-Emotional Support and Motivation. Furthermore, the study identified key educational management insights, namely Strengthening Instructional Flexibility and Creativity, Promoting Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches, and Enhancing Institutional and Parental Partnership. The findings highlight the critical role of teacher adaptability, collaboration, and inclusive practices in effectively navigating the curriculum and promoting equitable learning opportunities for diverse learners.

KEY WORDS

Navigating the curriculum, diverse learners, and grade 5 teachers

1. Introduction

Teaching Grade 5 learners in geographically isolated schools presents persistent challenges in addressing diverse learning needs. Many of these students come from Indigenous and culturally varied backgrounds, bringing with them different language experiences, academic readiness levels, and access to resources. However, the standardized curriculum often follows a rigid pace that does not reflect these realities. Struggling learners are left behind, while advanced students receive little enrichment. This situation highlights the tension between curriculum uniformity and the need for inclusivity, underscoring the importance of exploring how teachers adapt their practices to ensure equitable learning opportunities (Santos & Ramirez, 2022; Sales & Javier, 2025).

Globally, similar issues have been documented. In the United States, teachers face large class sizes and limited

professional development, making differentiated instruction difficult to implement. The rigid curriculum often fails to align with the diverse lived experiences of students, leading to disengagement and low motivation among marginalized groups (O’Keeffe & Rainsford, 2024). In the United Kingdom, the national curriculum has been criticized for its ethnocentric orientation, which marginalizes multicultural learners. The overemphasis on standardized testing sidelines holistic development, particularly in areas such as art and music that could support learners with special educational needs (Hindin, 2024). In Canada, teacher education programs often lack training in culturally responsive pedagogy and universal design for learning, leaving educators unprepared to address diverse classrooms effectively (Aranha, Mistry, & D’Costa, 2024). These international perspectives reveal a recurring gap between

inclusive education policies and classroom realities.

In the Philippines, the introduction of the MATATAG Curriculum has revealed practical challenges for teachers. In Metro Manila and Cebu City, educators report difficulties with pacing, time constraints, and limited resources, despite the curriculum's goal of strengthening foundational skills (Caranguian et al., 2025). Studies show that while teachers value differentiated instruction, overcrowded classrooms and insufficient training make implementation nearly impossible (Dacanay et al., 2023). In Davao City, transitional challenges with MATATAG highlight the need for stronger institutional support and preparedness (Bentayao et al., 2024). These findings suggest that curriculum reforms, while well-intentioned, often fail to provide the necessary support systems for teachers to implement them effectively.

Locally, in Marilog District, Davao City, teachers face multi-grade classrooms, limited teaching materials, and students with varying abilities. Indigenous and culturally diverse learners often struggle within a standardized curriculum that does not accommodate their needs. Teachers, with

limited professional development in inclusive and differentiated instruction, rely on improvisation and resilience to sustain learning. Despite these efforts, research in rural and Indigenous contexts remains scarce, with most studies focusing on urban or mainstream settings. This gap leaves educators in remote schools without adequate recognition of their unique challenges and strategies (Abrea et al., 2024).

This study therefore explores the lived experiences of Grade 5 teachers in Marilog District as they navigate curriculum rigidity, resource constraints, and learner diversity. By documenting their strategies, challenges, and insights, the research aims to inform professional development, resource allocation, and policy reforms that strengthen inclusive and culturally responsive education. Ultimately, it seeks to ensure equitable access to quality learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of geographic or cultural context. This aligns with global calls for more responsive and inclusive education systems that recognize diversity as a strength rather than a barrier (Pozas, Letzel, & Schneider, 2020; Bayram & Öztürk, 2020).

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore Grade 5 teachers' lived experiences in addressing diverse learners within a standardized curriculum. Phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on uncovering the essence of human experience, allowing teachers' voices to reveal how they navigate differentiated instruction, inclusive practices, and adaptive strategies in real classroom contexts. By using this approach, the research was able to capture not only the instructional adjustments teachers made but also the meanings they attached to their practices. This design provided rich, contextualized insights into how teachers balance curriculum demands with learner diversity, highlighting both the challenges they face and the coping mechanisms they employ (Creswell & Poth, 2019; Peters-Burton et al., 2023).

Ten Grade 5 teachers from five elementary schools in Marilog South

District, Davao City, were purposively selected to participate. They held Teacher I to Teacher III positions, had at least three years of teaching experience, and consistently received Very Satisfactory performance ratings. All had attended MATATAG or Enhanced K–10 curriculum training, ensuring familiarity with current reforms. These qualifications ensured that participants had both the professional background and direct classroom experience necessary to provide meaningful reflections on managing diverse learners. Their narratives were considered essential in understanding how teachers address learner diversity within the constraints of a standardized curriculum. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to share detailed accounts of their instructional practices, challenges, and insights.

Purposive sampling was deliberately employed to select participants with relevant

expertise and exposure. This design ensured that the study included teachers most capable of providing rich accounts of classroom realities. By focusing on information-rich participants, the research strengthened credibility and depth, capturing authentic experiences of teaching in heterogeneous and resource-constrained settings. Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling prioritized depth of understanding over generalizability, which is particularly appropriate for phenomenological studies (Andrade, 2020).

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. This format allowed flexibility, enabling teachers to share experiences freely while the researcher probed emerging themes. The guide was validated by education experts, refined through pilot testing, and designed to be respectful and sensitive to participants' contexts. This ensured that the data collected were authentic, comprehensive, and aligned with the study's objectives. The use of open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect deeply on their practices, challenges, and coping strategies, while the validation process strengthened the instrument's credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2020).

Data collection followed systematic steps to uphold ethical standards and ensure reliability. Ethical clearance was secured from the Graduate School, followed by permissions from the Schools Division Superintendent and school heads. Teachers were oriented about the study and provided informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The researcher actively listened and probed for clarity, fostering trust and openness. Transcriptions were coded and thematized, with recurring patterns

synthesized into themes that reflected teachers' strategies, challenges, and insights. This process ensured that participants' voices were faithfully represented and that findings were grounded in authentic classroom realities.

Data analysis combined Ritchie and Spencer's Framework Analysis with Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis. Transcripts were reviewed repeatedly for familiarization, coded inductively, and organized into categories. These categories were synthesized into overarching themes that captured how teachers navigated curriculum demands while addressing learner diversity. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and adherence to Lincoln and Guba's criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This rigorous process allowed the researcher to move from raw data to meaningful interpretations while maintaining transparency and methodological rigor.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed. Risks were minimal, though teachers could experience discomfort when reflecting on challenges. Benefits included opportunities for professional reflection and contributing to improved instructional practices. Privacy was safeguarded through anonymization and secure data storage, while transparency ensured participants understood the study's purpose and procedures. The researcher's qualifications as a Grade 5 teacher provided contextual sensitivity, enhancing rapport and interpretation of participants' reflections. These measures ensured that the study was conducted with integrity and respect for participants' dignity.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study show that Grade 5 teachers actively navigate curriculum demands while addressing diverse learner needs through differentiated instruction, adaptive strategies, and continuous assessment. Teachers reported grouping learners by ability, designing tiered tasks, and using peer-assisted learning to balance fast and slow learners. These practices reflect Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Model, which emphasizes

modifying content and process based on readiness and learning profiles. By categorizing students according to their pace and ability, teachers ensured that advanced learners were challenged while struggling learners received additional support. This approach demonstrates that differentiation is not simply an instructional choice but a necessity in diverse classrooms. Research supports this, noting that differentiated instruction enhances inclusion and

engagement when teachers adjust tasks and grouping strategies to meet varied abilities (Maphumulo & Biccard, 2024; Magister & Priyadi, 2025).

Teachers also encountered significant challenges, particularly time management constraints, learning gaps, and disruptions in lesson flow. Many struggled to balance curriculum pacing with the needs of learners requiring step-by-step guidance or remediation. These difficulties highlight the tension between standardized curriculum requirements and the realities of heterogeneous classrooms. Teachers often reported feeling pressured to complete lessons quickly, which limited opportunities for remediation or enrichment. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes how external structures such as curriculum rigidity and large class sizes influence classroom realities. Studies confirm that time constraints and resource limitations hinder the consistent application of inclusive practices, underscoring the need for systemic support and professional development to help teachers manage diverse classrooms effectively (Gibbs, 2023; Baraily & Sherpa, 2024).

To cope, teachers demonstrated instructional adaptation and flexibility. They shifted between whole-class and group instruction, integrated multimodal strategies such as visuals, games, and mapping activities, and adjusted lessons based on learner feedback. These adaptive practices show that teachers are not passive implementers of the curriculum but active agents who reshape instruction to meet learner needs. Flexibility allowed them to respond to classroom dynamics, ensuring that lessons remained engaging and accessible. This reflects Constructivist Learning Theory, which views learning as an active process shaped by interaction and adaptation. Teachers' ability to modify instruction based on student responses demonstrates their commitment to meaningful learning. Research further emphasizes that flexible teaching

approaches improve engagement and understanding, especially in diverse classrooms where learners benefit from varied instructional methods (Pozas & Letzel, 2023; Aribbay et al., 2024).

Assessment-driven practices also played a central role in creating supportive learning environments. Teachers used formative assessments such as quizzes, exit tickets, and reflection journals to guide instructional decisions. These tools allowed them to identify learning gaps, reteach concepts, and reinforce skills. By continuously monitoring student progress, teachers ensured that instruction was responsive and targeted. Simplified texts, visual aids, and structured support promoted inclusion, enabling all learners to participate meaningfully. This practice reflects the importance of aligning assessment with instruction, as formative tools provide real-time feedback that informs teaching strategies. Studies confirm that formative assessment strengthens differentiated instruction and supports equitable learning outcomes by ensuring that learners receive timely interventions (Lopez & Rivera, 2023; Martinez et al., 2021).

In reflection, the results highlight that Grade 5 teachers in diverse classrooms rely on a combination of differentiation, flexibility, and assessment to foster inclusion and engagement. While challenges such as time constraints and resource gaps persist, teachers' adaptive practices demonstrate resilience and commitment to equitable learning. Their strategies reveal that effective teaching in diverse classrooms requires not only instructional innovation but also emotional sensitivity and professional reflection. These findings underscore the importance of institutional support, professional development, and curriculum flexibility to sustain inclusive teaching strategies. Without systemic backing, teachers' efforts may be limited, but with adequate support, they can ensure that all learners progress meaningfully within standardized frameworks (Mendoza, 2024; Garcia & Tolentino, 2024).

4. Summary of findings, Implications and Future directions

The study revealed that Grade 5 teachers consistently encounter challenges in managing diverse learners, particularly differences in ability, engagement, and emotional readiness. Their experiences highlight the need for constant instructional adjustment within a standardized curriculum. Teachers reported modifying lesson delivery, adjusting pacing, and using varied strategies to ensure participation and understanding. This demonstrates that diversity in classrooms is not an occasional issue but a persistent reality requiring continuous adaptation and sensitivity. The findings emphasize that teachers must act as flexible facilitators of learning, balancing curriculum requirements with the individual needs of their students. Research confirms that rigid curricula often fail to accommodate learner variability, making teacher responsiveness essential for equitable learning outcomes (Santos & Ramirez, 2022; Gibbs, 2023).

Coping mechanisms emerged in three major themes, each underscoring the collaborative and adaptive nature of teaching in diverse classrooms. First, collaborative support systems were vital, with teachers relying on peer mentoring, professional sharing, parent involvement, and administrative flexibility. These networks provided both emotional and instructional support, helping teachers sustain inclusive practices. Second, technology-enhanced and differentiated instruction allowed teachers to personalize learning through digital tools, platforms, and ICT integration. This not only increased engagement but also accommodated differences in pace and ability. Third, socio-emotional support emphasized building learner confidence, addressing emotional needs, and fostering growth mindsets. Teachers recognized that emotional responsiveness and positive classroom climates were as important as academic strategies in supporting learner development. These coping mechanisms highlight that effective teaching in diverse classrooms is not an isolated effort but a shared responsibility among teachers,

families, and institutions (Maphumulo & Biccard, 2024; Magister & Priyadi, 2025).

Educational management insights also highlighted three themes that extend beyond classroom practice. Instructional flexibility and adaptive teaching emphasized learner-centered approaches, creative assessments, and varied strategies that respond to student readiness. Inclusive and supportive learning environments promoted peer collaboration, confidence-building, and equitable participation, showing that structured inclusivity fosters both academic and social growth. Strengthening home-school and institutional support underscored the importance of partnerships among teachers, families, and administrators in sustaining learner success. These insights confirm that inclusive education requires systemic support, not just teacher initiative. Leadership policies, parental engagement, and institutional collaboration are critical in embedding inclusivity into school culture and ensuring that learners thrive in diverse contexts (Lopez & Rivera, 2023; Martinez et al., 2021).

The implications of these findings suggest that classrooms are inherently heterogeneous, requiring flexible pedagogy and curriculum responsiveness. Teachers must be supported through professional development in adaptive teaching, differentiated instruction, and socio-emotional learning strategies. Schools should invest in digital infrastructure to enable technology-enhanced learning and prioritize learner well-being programs. Administrators play a critical role in embedding inclusive practices into school culture, fostering collaboration, and strengthening home-school partnerships. Addressing diverse learners effectively requires a holistic approach that integrates pedagogy, technology, emotional support, and institutional leadership. Without systemic support, teachers' efforts may be limited, but with adequate backing, they can ensure equitable learning outcomes for all students (Mendoza, 2024; Garcia & Tolentino, 2024).

5. References

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