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Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of three elementary teachers implementing inclusive education in Kalamansig District 1, Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design, the study examined the learning needs teachers accommodated, strategies they used, challenges they encountered, support available to them, and the ways their experiences shaped their teaching practices. Data came from an audio-recorded and transcribed face-to-face interview with one participant and written responses submitted through Messenger by two participants. The researcher analyzed the responses thematically by identifying significant statements, assigning initial codes, grouping related codes, and developing broader patterns. The manuscript reports that teachers supported learners described as having autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and learning disabilities. Reported practices included differentiated instruction, visual aids, hands-on activities, scaffolding, established routines, real-life examples, and relationship-building. Challenges included limited disability-specific training, inadequate instructional resources, classroom-management demands, and time constraints in multigrade settings. Teachers described relying on personal initiative, compassion, classroom adjustments, and informal peer support, while expressing a need for sustained training and stronger institutional support. The accounts also indicated growth in patience, empathy, flexibility, and student-centered teaching. Because the study involved three participants in one district and used different response modes, its findings are contextual rather than broadly generalizable. The article highlights the importance of aligning teachers' commitment with practical training, resources, collaboration, and administrative support.

Keywords

inclusive education, lived experiences, elementary teachers, differentiated instruction, teacher support

1. Introduction

Inclusive education aims to ensure that learners with diverse abilities and needs can participate meaningfully in education. Its implementation requires more than placing learners in a mainstream classroom; it also calls for teaching approaches, materials, and school systems that support access, participation, and learning. In the Philippines, Department of Education Order No. 72, s. 2009, frames inclusive education as a strategy for increasing children's participation in education. However, translating policy commitments into classroom practice can be challenging when teachers have limited access to specialist preparation, learning resources, and professional support.

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The thesis manuscript situates these concerns in Kalamansig District 1, Sultan Kudarat, where elementary teachers work with learners with varied learning needs, including in multigrade classroom contexts. The manuscript describes challenges involving disability-specific training, teaching materials, classroom management, time, and institutional support. At the same time, it documents teachers' efforts to adapt instruction through visual supports, hands-on activities, scaffolding, routines, differentiated tasks, and supportive relationships.

Teacher experience is important to understanding how inclusive education is enacted in daily classroom life. Differentiated instruction emphasizes adapting teaching to learner readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001). Universal Design for Learning offers a framework for providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Sociocultural and ecological perspectives also draw attention to the role of social interaction and the wider environments surrounding learners and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). These perspectives provide context for interpreting the practices and support needs described in the manuscript; they should not be treated as proof that the study directly measured the effectiveness of particular approaches.

This article examines the accounts of three elementary teachers implementing inclusive education in Kalamansig District 1, Sultan Kudarat. It focuses on the learning needs accommodated, strategies used, challenges experienced, support systems, coping practices, and perceived effects on teachers' approaches to teaching. The aim is to offer a context-specific account that may inform school-level reflection and future research, rather than to generalize the experiences of a small group to all teachers.

2. Research Questions

The thesis contains several versions of the research questions. For this article draft, the stated aims are summarized as the following focus areas, pending confirmation against the final approved research questions:

1. What learning needs and learner profiles do the participating teachers report accommodating?
2. What instructional strategies do they use to address diverse learning needs?
3. What challenges and support needs do they experience when implementing inclusive education?
4. How do they cope with these challenges, and how do the experiences influence their teaching practices?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Setting

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore elementary teachers' lived experiences implementing inclusive education in Kalamansig District 1, Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. The thesis identifies the setting as inclusive and multigrade classroom contexts. The final article should specify the study dates and provide a concise description of the setting only to the extent that doing so does not compromise participant confidentiality.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

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Three elementary teachers from different schools in Kalamansig District 1 participated. The thesis reports that purposive sampling was used and that participants were selected because they were actively accommodating learners with disabilities in classrooms at schools described as Department of Education-recognized inclusive schools. The manuscript states that informed consent was obtained and participants' identities were protected through participant codes. Further participant characteristics, such as years of experience and relevant training, should be reported only after the author verifies them from the original data.

3.3. Data Collection

The thesis reports two data-collection modes: Participant 1 took part in a face-to-face interview that was audio-recorded and transcribed, while Participants 2 and 3 submitted written responses through Messenger. The data were gathered using open-ended questions addressing teachers' experiences, strategies, challenges, and support needs. Because the modes differ, the final article should explain whether the written responses were collected using the same interview guide, whether follow-up questions were possible, and how comparability across responses was considered.

3.4. Data Analysis

The researcher reports using thematic analysis. The data were reviewed repeatedly for familiarity; significant statements were identified and assigned initial codes; related codes were grouped into categories; and broader themes were developed and reviewed against the responses. The thesis cites Braun and Clarke (2006) to support this approach, but that source is not included in the thesis reference list and must be added with verified bibliographic details before submission. The article should also identify the specific thematic-analysis approach used and describe the steps actually completed, rather than retaining planned procedures from the thesis.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The thesis states that participants received information about the study, gave informed consent, were told that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw, and were represented through codes to protect their identities. It also states that the data were stored securely and access was limited to the researcher. Before publication, the author should verify the name of the ethics-review body, approval or clearance reference (if applicable), and the consent process, and report only details supported by the records. Any identifying details in quotations should be checked before publication.

4. Results and Discussion

The results below synthesize recurring findings described in the thesis. The source manuscript contains inconsistent theme numbering and an inconsistent stated theme count; therefore, the headings in this draft are descriptive groupings rather than a claim that the original coding definitively produced exactly four or five themes. The author should confirm the final thematic structure against the coded data before submission.

4.1. Learner Needs and the Work of Inclusive Teaching

The thesis reports that participants accommodated learners described as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and learning disabilities. Their

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accounts portray inclusive teaching as both instructional and relational work: teachers sought to create classrooms in which learners felt valued and understood while adjusting their support to individual strengths and challenges. One statement attributed to a participant described working to create an environment where children could feel "valued and understood." This quotation should be checked against the original transcript or written response before publication.

The accounts suggest that teachers' understanding of inclusion was shaped by the daily responsibility of responding to different learning, behavioral, and emotional needs. The thesis also describes emotional labor and compassion as significant parts of the experience, especially when teachers balanced individual learner support with responsibilities to other learners and grade levels. These accounts illustrate the demands teachers perceived; they do not establish the prevalence of particular disabilities or the effectiveness of the overall classroom provision.

4.2. Instructional Strategies and Adaptation

The manuscript identifies differentiated instruction, visual aids, hands-on activities, scaffolding, real-life examples, established routines, and relationship-building as strategies used to support learners. The reported approaches reflect efforts to vary instruction and provide structured, accessible learning experiences. They are broadly consistent with differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) and Universal Design for Learning (Meyer et al., 2014), although the study did not directly evaluate the impact of each strategy on learner achievement.

Teachers' accounts suggest that adaptation often relied on their own initiative and experience. This is an important practical finding because teachers described making instructional adjustments even when specialist training or materials were limited. The article should avoid claiming that a particular strategy improved outcomes unless the original data contain concrete, attributable evidence supporting that claim.

4.3. Challenges and Gaps in Institutional Support

The thesis identifies limited formal or disability-specific training, inadequate instructional resources, classroom-management demands, and time constraints associated with multigrade teaching. Participants also described institutional support and training as insufficient or superficial. These constraints were presented as barriers to implementing inclusive practices consistently.

The findings indicate a gap between teachers' commitment to inclusion and the practical conditions available to support it. The article should frame this as the participants' reported experience in the study setting, not as a verified description of every school in the district. The thesis recommends regular and more specialized professional development, appropriate teaching materials and assistive resources, local teacher collaboration, administrative support, and stronger school cultures of inclusion.

4.4. Coping, Professional Growth, and Changed Perceptions

To respond to challenges, teachers reportedly adjusted classroom routines and teaching approaches, relied on patience and compassion, collaborated informally with colleagues, and drew on limited professional-development opportunities. The manuscript also describes a perceived shift toward greater empathy, flexibility, creativity, and student-centered planning. One participant statement in the thesis expresses the belief that all children can learn and develop when they receive appropriate

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support and an enabling environment; verify the exact wording and attribution against the source data before using it as a direct quotation.

These accounts portray inclusive education as demanding but professionally meaningful. They suggest that direct experience with diverse learners may influence teachers' attitudes and instructional choices. However, because the data are self-reported and the sample is small, the findings should be presented as participants' perceptions rather than as measured changes in teaching quality or student outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The accounts of three elementary teachers in Kalamansig District 1 depict inclusive education as a commitment to meeting diverse learner needs amid practical and institutional constraints. Participants reported using differentiated instruction, visual and hands-on supports, scaffolding, routines, and relationship-building. They also described limited disability-specific training, inadequate materials, classroom-management demands, and time pressure in multigrade settings. Their reported coping practices included adapting lessons, relying on compassion and personal initiative, and seeking informal peer support. The experiences were also associated in the participants' accounts with greater patience, empathy, flexibility, and attention to individual learners.

The findings point to the need to pair teachers' commitment with sustained, practical training, accessible instructional resources, collaboration, and active administrative support. Given the small, context-specific sample and mixed response modes, these findings should not be generalized beyond the participants without further research. Studies involving additional schools and participants, clearly documented data-collection procedures, and multiple perspectives could deepen understanding of inclusive education implementation in rural and multigrade contexts.

6. Implications for Practice

- Provide sustained, practical professional development focused on the learning and support needs teachers encounter, inclusive classroom management, differentiated instruction, and assistive resources.
- Ensure that schools have appropriate teaching materials and accessible learning environments that support participation by diverse learners.
- Establish school- or district-level teacher collaboration and mentoring so educators can share strategies, discuss challenges, and plan supports together.
- Strengthen administrative support for inclusive teaching, including realistic teaching loads, coordination with relevant specialists when available, and school-family collaboration.
- Monitor implementation through further research that includes more participants and clearly documents how data are collected, coded, and interpreted.

7. Limitations

This study involved three teachers from one district. One participant provided data through a recorded face-to-face interview, while two provided written responses through Messenger; this difference may have affected the depth and comparability of responses. The manuscript does not provide enough verified information in its current form to establish the study dates, the exact ethics-review details, or whether all quotations were checked against the original source records. The

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findings are therefore best understood as context-specific accounts rather than representative evidence about all inclusive classrooms.

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