



The Lived Experiences of Teachers in Handling the Learning Gaps of Grade 4 Learners

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of Grade 4 teachers in addressing the learning gaps of learners and examined how they navigated the challenges associated with supporting diverse academic needs. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study investigated teachers' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to their instructional practices. Thirteen Grade 4 teachers were purposively selected as participants, with six participating in in-depth individual interviews and seven in a focus group discussion. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings generated three clustered themes: challenges, coping mechanisms, and lessons learned. Teachers' experiences revealed challenges related to teaching struggles, the lingering effects of the pandemic, learners' academic difficulties, and limitations in instructional strategies. To address these learning gaps, teachers employed flexible instructional approaches, provided instructional support, implemented remedial interventions, adjusted teaching practices to learner needs, and fostered learner motivation and engagement. The experiences further highlighted the importance of compassionate teaching, continuous refinement of instructional strategies, and patience in supporting learners with varying levels of academic readiness. This study contributes to the growing body of research on learning recovery by providing insights into teachers' lived experiences and adaptive practices in addressing learning gaps. The findings underscore the need for sustained professional support, evidence-based intervention programs, and inclusive teaching approaches to strengthen learning recovery efforts and improve educational outcomes among elementary learners.

Keywords

educational management, teachers, learning gaps, Grade 4 learners, phenomenology, Philippines

1. Introduction

Education is essential for human development; however, persistent learning gaps continue to hinder educational equity and learners' future opportunities. Scholars agree that these disparities have been exacerbated by increasing learner diversity and educational disruptions, highlighting the need for inclusive, adaptive, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Although educational systems promote quality education for all, challenges remain in effectively addressing diverse learning needs



and ensuring long-term academic success (Al-Labadi et al., 2025; Elumalai et al., 2021; Quines & Relacion, 2022; Galanakis et al., 2020).

Despite educational reforms advocating flexible and innovative instructional approaches, a gap exists between policy expectations and classroom realities. Teachers continue to face challenges related to limited resources, varying learner capacities, and changing instructional modalities. While alternative learning strategies have been widely adopted, there is limited understanding of how teachers effectively adapt these practices to address learning deficiencies among learners (Azorín, 2020; Gamage et al., 2022; Stanistreet et al., 2020; Fernandez & Quines, 2023).

Moreover, a significant research gap remains regarding teachers' lived experiences in managing the learning gaps of Grade 4 learners. Existing studies primarily focus on general educational inequalities rather than teachers' specific strategies and challenges. Therefore, examining teachers' experiences is necessary to generate practical insights that can strengthen instructional practices and support educational recovery and sustainability (Maatuk et al., 2022; Raes et al., 2020; Turner & Theilking, 2019).

Research Objectives

Based on the drawn problems in the context and purpose of this study in understanding the lived experiences of the Grade 4 teachers in addressing the gaps among learners, these questions were explored to sought findings.

1. How do the participant describe their challenges as teachers in handling the learning gaps of Grade 4 learners?
2. How do teachers cope with their challenges in handling the learning gaps of Grade 4 learners?
3. What are the lessons learned of teachers in handling the learning gaps of Grade 4 learners?

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 4 teachers in addressing learners' learning gaps. While existing studies have primarily focused on educational inequalities and learning outcomes, limited research has examined teachers' firsthand experiences, instructional adaptations, and challenges in managing these gaps. Grounded in phenomenological principles, the study utilized bracketing (epoché) to minimize researcher bias and authentically capture participants' perspectives. Through in-depth interviews and phenomenological analysis, significant statements and themes were identified to uncover teachers' shared and unique experiences. By addressing the lack of context-specific research, this study provides evidence-based insights that may inform educational policies, instructional interventions, and teacher support programs aimed at promoting sustainable learning recovery and improving educational outcomes among Grade 4 learners.

Locale of the Study

This study was conducted at Polonuling Central Elementary School, a public elementary school located in Polonuling, Tupi, South Cotabato, under the Schools Division of South Cotabato. The school serves learners from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and implements the curriculum prescribed by the Department of Education (DepEd). Polonuling Central Elementary School was selected as the locale of the study because it experienced the educational challenges associated with learning disruptions



during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among Grade 4 learners. The school also provided a suitable setting for exploring teachers' experiences in addressing learning gaps, as its teachers were actively involved in implementing learning continuity measures and various intervention programs designed to support learners' academic recovery.

Respondents of the Study

Population and Sample

The participants of this study consisted of thirteen (13) Grade 4 teachers from Polonuling Central Elementary School during the 2022–2023 school year. Purposive sampling was employed to identify and select participants who possessed relevant experience and knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Teachers were qualified to participate if they were currently teaching Grade 4, had at least three (3) years of teaching experience, and had direct involvement in addressing learners' learning gaps through learning continuity and intervention strategies. The selection was based on their professional experiences, active engagement in supporting learners during and after the pandemic, and willingness to share their insights. Of the thirteen participants, six (6) took part in In-Depth Interviews (IDI), while seven (7) participated in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards to protect the rights, dignity, and welfare of all teacher participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participation was voluntary, with participants free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was ensured in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173) through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage, and findings were reported in aggregated form to prevent identification of participants. The study posed minimal risk, and participants were allowed to skip questions or discontinue participation if discomfort arose. Necessary permissions were secured from school authorities prior to the conduct of the study, and academic integrity was observed through honest and transparent data handling, with no fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism. No conflict of interest was declared, ensuring the credibility and ethical rigor of the research.

3. Results and Discussion

This study presents the result of the study, focusing on the profiles of the thirteen (13) teacher-participants and their experiences in addressing learning gaps. It categorizes the findings into themes that highlight the challenges, coping strategies, and insights of teachers in managing diverse classroom needs.

Table 1. Challenges of Grade 4 Teachers in Handling the Learning Gaps of the Learners

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Teaching learners is challenging, demanding. Preparing lessons and activities adds stress and difficulty daily. Advising students remains very challenging.	Teaching Struggles
Handling learning gaps is challenging. Teaching demands constant preparation and adjustments.	Pandemic Burden

Pandemic makes lessons daily challenging.	
Learners struggle with reading and concepts. Repetition, lack of motivation, and being left behind persists. Parents' illiteracy hinders students' learning.	Learning Difficulties
Developing new strategies is challenging. Improving teaching strategies requires extra effort. Balancing strategies demands effort and patience.	Strategy Struggles

Table 1 presents the clustered themes derived from teachers' narratives on their experiences in addressing learners' learning gaps. Four themes emerged: Teaching Struggles, Pandemic Burden, Learning Difficulties, and Strategy Struggles. These reflect challenges in lesson preparation, pandemic-related disruptions, learner academic gaps, and difficulties in implementing effective instructional strategies.

Table 2. Coping Mechanism of Grade 4 Teachers in Handling the Learning Gaps of the Learners

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Adjusting lessons and materials helps learners cope with challenges. Returning to basics supports slow readers and nonreaders effectively. Flexible approaches address learning challenges.	Flexible Strategies
Using mother tongue, CVC words, and remedial instruction supports learners. Games and review enhance understanding. Inclusive spaces promote learning and belonging.	Instructional Support
Patience and strategy manage teaching challenges. Remedial teaching and extra time support learners' diverse needs. Patience and flexibility improve teaching.	Patient Adjustment
Using differentiated instruction and activities motivates learners effectively. Encouraging learners fosters motivation, engagement, and academic growth. Comfortable environment supports learning effectively.	Learning Encouragement
Providing remedial instruction helps learners grasp basic concepts effectively.	Learning Adjustments



Adapting lessons improves learner understanding. Using activities, games, and multi-level lessons engages all learners.	
Providing remedial instruction supports learners' academic growth effectively. Games, worksheets, and visits enhance learning. Time and attendance ensure learning success.	Remedial Interventions

Table 2 presents six emergent themes on teachers' coping mechanisms: Flexible Strategies, Instructional Support, Patient Adjustment, Learning Encouragement, Learning Adjustments, and Remedial Interventions. These highlight the adaptive strategies used by teachers to support learners, manage diverse needs, and promote academic recovery through differentiated and remedial instruction.

Table 3. Lesson Learned of Grade 4 Teachers in Handling the Learning Gaps of the Learners

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Teachers must adapt to learners' needs. Patience and effort ensure effective teaching. Loving learners fosters positive relationships. Every learner requires unique approaches. Teachers play a vital role.	Compassionate Teaching
Facing challenges improves teaching techniques. Connections with learners enhance engagement. Assessments help refine teaching strategies. Patience and adaptation foster relationships. Continuous improvement develops innovative strategies.	Strategy Refinement
Teaching is manageable with patience. Understanding pupils requires passion and effort. Assessing learners guides effective lesson planning. Face-to-face teaching is personally stressful. Patience is essential for teaching.	Teaching Patiently

Table 3 presents three emergent themes on teachers' lessons learned: Compassionate Teaching, Strategy Refinement, and Teaching Patience. These reflect teachers' professional growth, emphasizing empathy, improved instructional practices, and strengthened patience in addressing learning gaps among learners.



Discussion

Challenges in Addressing Learning Gaps among Grade 4

The findings suggest that learning gaps are not merely learner-related issues but systemic challenges that reshape teachers' instructional, emotional, and professional responsibilities. This study extends existing knowledge by highlighting teachers' roles as adaptive facilitators who continuously modify their pedagogical practices to address diverse learner needs. The findings also reinforce learner-centered and differentiated instruction theories, emphasizing that sustainable solutions require institutional support rather than relying solely on teachers' individual efforts (Batubara, 2021; Elangovan et al., 2020; Maatuk et al., 2022).

The study has important implications for educational policy, teacher preparation, and professional development. Teacher education programs should strengthen competencies in differentiated instruction, literacy and numeracy interventions, assessment practices, and educational technology. Likewise, policymakers should provide continuous professional development, adequate instructional resources, and teacher well-being programs to reduce burnout and improve instructional quality. Addressing learning gaps requires a collaborative and system-wide approach involving schools, families, and educational stakeholders (Agyapong et al., 2022; Carroll et al., 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Despite its contributions, this phenomenological study has limitations regarding the transferability of its findings, as participants' experiences were drawn from a specific context and are not intended for generalization. Future studies may include multiple settings, larger participant groups, or mixed-method approaches to broaden the applicability of the findings. Nevertheless, this study contributes valuable context-specific evidence that can inform educational policies and support mechanisms aimed at improving learning recovery and educational outcomes among Grade 4 learners (Al-Labadi et al., 2025; Vargas Rubilar & Oros, 2021; Westphal et al., 2022).

Coping Mechanism of Teachers Handling the Learning Gaps of Grade 4 Learners.

Evidence from the study suggests that, addressing learning gaps requires a shift from standardized instruction. The findings indicate that addressing learning gaps requires a shift from traditional instruction toward adaptive, learner-centered, and inclusive teaching practices. This study extends existing knowledge by showing that teachers' coping mechanisms are not merely responses to challenges but essential professional competencies that support learning recovery. The findings also reinforce differentiated instruction and constructivist learning theories, emphasizing that effective teaching requires integrating academic, emotional, and social support to meet diverse learner needs (Biswas et al., 2020; Chin et al., 2020; Tarkar, 2020).

Ideally, this holds an important implication for educational policy, teacher preparation, and professional development. Teacher education programs should strengthen competencies in differentiated instruction, remedial interventions, classroom assessment, and family-school partnerships. Likewise, schools and policymakers should institutionalize continuous professional development, provide adequate instructional resources, and establish structured intervention programs to support both teachers and learners. These findings suggest that addressing learning gaps requires a collaborative and system-wide approach rather than relying solely on teachers' resilience (Batubara, 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Zhu & Liu, 2020).

Despite its contributions, this phenomenological study is limited to a specific educational context; therefore, its findings are not intended for generalization but may be transferable to similar settings. Future research may involve multiple contexts, larger participant groups, or mixed-method approaches to broaden the applicability of the findings. Nevertheless, this study contributes valuable

evidence by highlighting the need for sustained institutional support, evidence-based interventions, and continuous teacher development to promote equitable and long-term educational outcomes among Grade 4 learners (Allbright et al., 2019; Cardichon et al., 2020; Taghizadeh & Hasani Yourdshahi, 2020).

Lesson Learned by Teachers Handling the Learning Gaps of Grade 4 Learners

The findings extend existing knowledge by showing that addressing learning gaps is not only an instructional task but also a deeply relational and reflective process that reshapes teachers' professional identity. Rather than relying solely on technical strategies, teachers' responses are grounded in empathy, adaptability, and continuous reflection, reinforcing constructivist and socio-emotional perspectives that view teaching as a co-constructed and context-dependent practice (Esteve-Mon et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2019).

These results have important implications for policy and professional development. Learning gap interventions should be supported by systems that prioritize teacher well-being, collaboration, and sustained reflective practice, rather than focusing only on student remediation. Teacher education and training programs should also strengthen adaptive expertise and socio-emotional competencies to better prepare educators for diverse and post-pandemic classroom realities (Attard & Holmes, 2022; Fabbro et al., 2020).

Methodologically, the study offers context-bound insights that are transferable to similar settings but not generalizable. Reliance on self-reported data and the lack of longitudinal evidence limit deeper understanding of practice over time. Future research should incorporate multiple data sources and longer-term designs to better capture how teachers' strategies and perspectives evolve in addressing learning gaps (Heilporn et al., 2021; Montacute & Cullinane, 2021; Sanusi et al., 2022).

4. Conclusion

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of Grade 4 teachers in addressing learners' learning gaps, focusing on their challenges, coping mechanisms, and lessons learned. Findings revealed that teachers encountered difficulties related to instructional demands, pandemic-related disruptions, learner learning gaps, and limited instructional strategies, yet they responded through flexible teaching approaches, instructional support, remedial interventions, and continuous adjustments to meet diverse learner needs. These experiences contributed to their professional growth, particularly in developing compassionate teaching, refining instructional strategies, and strengthening patience in handling learners with varying academic abilities. Hence, the study emphasizes the importance of teachers' adaptive practices in addressing learning gaps in post-pandemic contexts and highlights the need for sustained professional development, strengthened instructional support, and effective remedial programs, while noting that the findings are limited to a single-school context and suggesting that future research may involve broader samples and further evaluation of intervention effectiveness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that future research further examine the psychological and emotional effects of learning gaps on both teachers and learners, as well as the long-term impact of post-pandemic disruptions on academic performance. Studies may also evaluate the effectiveness of remote, blended, and remedial instruction, particularly in improving reading and mathematics competencies, and explore strategies to strengthen parental involvement in foundational learning. In addition, further investigation is suggested on the role of teacher training programs in addressing



learning gaps, the causes of learner issues such as absenteeism and disruptive behavior, and the effectiveness of strategies such as mother tongue-based instruction, interactive activities, technology integration, home visitation, and motivational interventions. Lastly, future studies may assess how policy initiatives and instructional support systems can be enhanced to ensure more sustainable and effective learning recovery.

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