

Creating an Inclusive Classroom: Perspective of Elementary Grade Teachers

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Abstract: This study explored the perspectives of elementary teachers on promoting inclusivity within their classrooms. Their shared experiences highlighted both the strategies they employed and the difficulties they encountered in fostering an inclusive learning environment. Ten (10) teachers from Bago Oshiro Elementary School in the Tugbok District, Division of Davao City, participated in the research. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews conducted via virtual meetings and limited face-to-face sessions, all carried out in accordance with standard health protocols. Guided by a phenomenological approach and analyzed thematically, the study revealed that the teachers primarily used differentiated instruction and collaborative learning as key strategies for inclusion. Meanwhile, the main challenges identified were limited awareness and insufficient resources. From these findings, two important insights emerged: the need for teacher training on inclusive practices and the provision of adequate learning materials. Ultimately, this study aimed to contribute valuable understanding of how teachers can effectively build inclusive classrooms, offering implications for improving the quality of education in schools.

Keywords: *Creating Inclusive Classroom, Perspective, Elementary Grade Teachers.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In inclusive education, the central goal is to develop classrooms that embrace all learners regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. According to ViewSonic (2020), inclusive classrooms are typically designed to ensure that students with special needs, disabilities, or impairments can learn alongside their peers in age-appropriate, general education settings. While this remains the most common understanding, the concept of inclusion has continued to evolve, now extending beyond special education to address various forms of diversity.

Lamport (2012) emphasizes that inclusive classrooms are characterized by warmth, acceptance, and respect for diversity. Such environments not only promote social interaction but also enhance students' academic performance. However, establishing an inclusive classroom is not an instant process; it often requires months of consistent effort to cultivate a space where all learners feel safe, valued, and capable of achieving their full potential. Slee (2013) further underscores that inclusion demands an ongoing commitment from educators and schools to continually improve their practices.

Similarly, Webster (2014) explains that teachers play a crucial role in nurturing inclusion by modeling and promoting respect for diversity. Inclusion methods help maintain a welcoming atmosphere for every learner, not only for those with special needs. Through professional development, teachers can gain the confidence and skills necessary to apply differentiated instruction that responds to the varied needs of their students. Furthermore, collaboration with parents is essential. Teachers who establish open communication and engage parents in the learning process help them recognize the advantages of inclusive education.

The benefits of inclusive classrooms have been well-documented. McCarty (2006) notes that such environments enable students with special needs to improve their social behaviors and develop stronger interpersonal skills by interacting with peers who serve as positive role models. Likewise, Kavales and Forness (2000) assert that inclusion fosters social acceptance, as continuous interaction between students with and without disabilities encourages tolerance and appreciation of differences.

Ekeh and Oladayo (2012) argue that inclusion goes beyond merely placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms; it also involves designing approaches that allow every student to thrive without exclusion. In

inclusive education, both regular and special needs learners share the same space, promoting mutual understanding and collaboration.

Despite its many advantages, implementing inclusive classrooms poses numerous challenges. Hyunjeong et al. (2014) observe that many teachers lack adequate training to handle students with special needs, leading to feelings of unpreparedness and uncertainty. Although most teachers support inclusion, they often doubt their ability to effectively meet the diverse needs of all learners. Evins (2015) adds that some teachers hesitate to embrace inclusion due to concerns that it might slow class progress, create distractions, or increase their workload. The demand for additional preparation time, support, and resources often discourages teachers from fully engaging in inclusive practices.

Moreover, Hehir (2016) further points out that teachers worry about the possible disruption of lessons and the challenge of implementing necessary modifications, especially given limited time, training, and funding. Understanding teachers' perspectives on creating inclusive classrooms is therefore essential. Their experiences provide firsthand insights into the realities of inclusion, its successes, barriers, and potential areas for improvement. Gathering such narratives contributes to the broader effort of building learning environments that truly support the diverse needs of all students through inclusive education.

II. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to gather data essential for addressing the research questions. Through in-depth interviews, participants were given the opportunity to speak openly and honestly about their experiences. The study adopted a descriptive–explanatory phenomenological approach, focusing on understanding the lived experiences of teachers in creating inclusive classrooms.

According to Hatch (2012), qualitative research is a form of naturalistic inquiry that seeks to understand everyday life and human behavior within its real-world context. Naturalistic researchers believe that meaningful knowledge is best gained from individuals' lived experiences rather than through the detached, objective lens commonly associated with quantitative methods. Similarly, Burns and Grove (2003) describe qualitative research as an inductive, holistic, and process-oriented approach that aims to understand, interpret, and describe phenomena, thereby giving meaning to life experiences.

The participants of this study included ten (10) elementary teachers from Bago Oshiro Elementary School in the Tugbok District, Division of Davao City. They were selected from kindergarten to Grade 6 levels through purposive sampling, ensuring that each had at least three years

of teaching experience as a permanent classroom teacher. This criterion ensured that participants had adequate familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation. In qualitative research, purposive selection is appropriate because it ensures that participants possess firsthand experience relevant to the research topic.

Since the study involved teachers from the researcher's own school, it was anticipated that some participants might initially hesitate to share information openly. To address this, ethical safeguards were strictly observed to promote trust and ensure voluntary participation. Consistent with the ethical principles outlined by Mack et al. (2005), namely respect for persons, beneficence, justice, informed consent, and confidentiality, the researcher ensured that participants' rights and well-being were protected throughout the study.

The researcher played a central role in the data collection and analysis process. As the primary instrument of the study, the researcher conducted and facilitated the interviews, guided by the research questions and appropriate probing statements. All interviews were personally transcribed and analyzed by the researcher to ensure authenticity and accuracy. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, allowing the participants to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences freely. The interviews were transcribed for analysis. As Koontz and Weinrich (2000) suggest, transcriptions need not be entirely verbatim as long as the essence and meaning of the participants' responses are faithfully captured. Each transcript was returned to the respective participant for validation to ensure accuracy and credibility.

The data analysis followed the steps outlined by O'Connor and Gibson (2003) for qualitative data analysis. The process began with microanalysis and open coding, examining the data line by line to identify emerging ideas and patterns. Codes were then organized and grouped into broader categories and themes that represented the participants' collective experiences. This thematic analysis allowed the researcher to derive insights and interpretations that illuminated the central phenomenon of the study. Rigorous and systematic procedures were maintained throughout the analysis to ensure the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Guided by the study's conceptual framework and interview matrix, this research explored the perspectives of elementary school teachers on creating an inclusive classroom. The in-depth interviews were conducted during the participants' available time and at their convenience to ensure comfort and openness. Each participant willingly took part in the study and shared their insights regarding the topic. Their familiarity with the concept of inclusion allowed them to express their thoughts and experiences more meaningfully. Based on the data collected, several key themes emerged that

describe how elementary teachers create inclusive learning environments for their students:

➤ *Differentiated Instruction*

The participants emphasized that differentiated instruction plays a vital role in effectively teaching students with diverse needs. This approach enables teachers to adapt their instruction to accommodate individual differences while pursuing common learning goals. Sparks (2015) describes differentiated instruction as the process of recognizing each student's unique learning strengths, needs, and interests and modifying lessons accordingly, a widely accepted practice in fostering learning among diverse groups of students.

➤ *Collaborative Learning*

The teacher-participants also recognized collaborative learning as a key element in promoting inclusivity within the classroom. This approach allows students to engage actively with one another, fostering cooperation and shared responsibility for learning. The Education Endowment Foundation (2023) explains that collaborative or cooperative learning involves students working together in small groups on specific tasks or learning activities where each member participates meaningfully. In some cases, group members may complete different parts of a task that contribute to a common outcome, while in others, they work collectively on a shared activity. Unlike unstructured group work, collaborative learning is intentional and organized, often encouraging students of mixed abilities to support one another. Some approaches even involve team-based challenges or competitions designed to strengthen collaboration and enhance learning outcomes.

While the participants applied various approaches and strategies to promote inclusivity, they also encountered several challenges in putting these into practice. Their experiences revealed key barriers that hindered the full realization of an inclusive classroom. The themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed below:

➤ *Lack of Awareness*

One of the major challenges identified by the participants was the lack of awareness regarding inclusive education. Several teachers shared that they often felt uncertain about how to handle the diverse needs of students within the classroom. This limited understanding of inclusion affected their ability to fully implement inclusive practices. Hoque (2022) emphasizes that the essence of inclusive education is often undermined by insufficient awareness, negative attitudes, and a lack of sensitivity among teachers, classmates, parents, and the wider community. As a result, some children continue to experience discrimination and exclusion. Hoque further explains that education for children with special needs has evolved from special education to integrated and, ultimately, to inclusive education. However, the successful implementation of inclusion requires that children with special needs learn in regular schools, within their own communities,

and with regular teachers. Inclusion values diversity and recognizes every learner's right to education while acknowledging that each child possesses unique strengths and needs.

➤ *Lack of Resources*

Another prominent challenge expressed by the participants was the lack of resources. Many teachers noted that limited materials, instructional tools, and support hindered their ability to create an inclusive learning environment. Maffea (2020) points out that the shortage of classroom resources represents a persistent and complex issue that affects both teachers and students, and may even extend its impact to parents. This lack of resources can cause considerable distress and prevent teachers and students from reaching their full potential. Without sufficient learning materials, technological tools, and administrative support, teachers may struggle to sustain inclusive practices effectively.

Beyond identifying the strategies and challenges, the study also derived insights that could help teachers overcome barriers in fostering inclusive classrooms. These insights emerged directly from the participants' lived experiences and are intended to guide practical improvement in teaching practices. Two key insights were drawn: 1. Conduct Training for Teachers. Continuous professional development focused on inclusive education is essential to enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and confidence in addressing diverse learners' needs; 2. Provision of Learning Resources – Supplying adequate instructional materials and classroom resources will enable teachers to implement inclusion strategies more effectively and support meaningful learning for all students. These insights highlight the importance of institutional support and ongoing teacher preparation in sustaining inclusive education.

Overall, the strategies identified by elementary teachers, differentiated instruction and collaborative learning, were found to be effective in fostering inclusivity and promoting a sense of belonging among students. These approaches are strongly supported by existing literature, which affirms their significance in creating inclusive learning environments. However, challenges such as lack of awareness and lack of resources remain major obstacles. Limited teacher knowledge and inadequate preparation in adapting curriculum, lessons, and school activities to meet the needs of diverse learners can lead to stress and frustration among both teachers and students. This study therefore proposes two key actions to bridge the gaps identified. If these recommendations are effectively implemented, the challenges faced by teachers in creating inclusive classrooms can be significantly reduced, thereby enhancing the quality and inclusivity of education for all learners

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