

Teaching Diverse Learners: Strategies of Teachers in the Elementary Schools

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Abstract: This study explored the strategies employed by elementary school teachers in addressing the needs of diverse learners. The participants' narratives revealed both the instructional approaches and the challenges encountered in managing diversity within the classroom setting. Eight (8) elementary grade teachers from a public school in Marilog B District, Division of Davao City, participated in the study. Data were collected through a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews conducted via virtual conferences and limited face-to-face sessions, all in compliance with established health protocols. Through thematic analysis, two primary strategies emerged: peer learning and project-based learning. Meanwhile, the challenges faced by teachers were categorized into two major themes: bullying and lack of student motivation. From these findings, the study proposed key insights such as the need to strengthen school-based anti-bullying initiatives and to foster positive reinforcement practices within classrooms. The results emphasized that learner diversity, shaped by varying family backgrounds, values, and personalities, often leads to issues such as bullying, interpersonal conflicts, and demotivation, which complicate classroom management and discipline. Overall, this study sought to provide meaningful insights into teachers' strategies for managing diverse learners, contributing to the enhancement of effective and inclusive instructional practices that promote quality education.

Keywords: Teaching, Diverse, Learners, Strategies, Teachers, Elementary, School.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The composition of today's higher education classroom is shaped by a multitude of factors, including globalization, technological advancement, economic transformation, and social change. These developments have contributed to an increasingly diverse student population characterized by varying personalities, identities, and worldviews. According to AU Education (2019), diversity within the classroom plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process, as it enables learners to encounter perspectives and opinions beyond those formed through their early socialization. Exposure to differing viewpoints encourages students to engage in critical reflection, challenge their own beliefs, and develop new ways of understanding the world around them.

Mittha (2021) defines "diverse learners" as encompassing a wide range of abilities, cultural backgrounds, and learning preferences. Contemporary approaches to diversity in education have moved away from addressing the "average" learner toward inclusive methods that ensure equitable opportunities for all students. This shift does not entail designing lessons tailored to each individual but rather incorporating varied learning materials, activities, and assessments that engage

different learners. While discussions about teaching strategies often categorize students, such as English language learners, gifted and talented students, or those with special needs, these classifications, although useful for identifying necessary accommodations, can sometimes obscure the broader goal of inclusivity. Effective pedagogy, therefore, must account for the needs of all learners rather than focusing solely on specific groups.

In the same vein, Danau (2021) describes diversity as encompassing both inherent and acquired human differences, which may become grounds for exclusion or discrimination. As societies grow increasingly complex, deliberate efforts are required to combat all forms of inequality and to view diversity as a resource rather than a challenge. Education, being a fundamental human right and a public good, should be accessible to all individuals regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ability, economic status, ethnicity, language, religion, or citizenship. Ensuring such inclusivity is vital to achieving equity and social cohesion.

Gale and Mills (2013) emphasize that the demographic shifts and evolving expectations of a globalized society compel higher education practitioners to revisit and realign their

teaching practices. To meet these demands, classroom design and pedagogy must foster participation and provide equal learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their physical, cognitive, emotional, or social differences. Barrington (2004) further notes that embedding inclusivity within teaching and learning practices is an essential strategy for addressing the growing complexity of higher education environments.

However, challenges remain. Sari and Yuce (2020) observe that many teachers remain unconvinced of the importance of educating diverse learners as a means of enhancing academic skills and promoting social unity. Some educators express skepticism toward the practicality of multicultural education, while others admit to having limited knowledge of inclusive teaching approaches. Time constraints and overloaded curricula often hinder teachers from integrating multicultural principles into their lessons. Gay (2002) similarly highlights that educators without adequate training are often ill-prepared to design effective learning environments for students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Likewise, Hammond (2010) points out that untrained and inexperienced teachers can unintentionally create learning environments that fail to affirm students' right to learn. Du Plessis (2018) adds that teachers working outside their field of expertise tend to have limited confidence in their subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, leading to a diminished sense of professional identity. This lack of alignment between teacher competence and classroom demands undermines both educational quality and the effective management of student diversity.

Given the importance of effectively teaching diverse learners, it is imperative to understand students' varying cognitive, behavioral, and physical learning needs. Without such understanding, elementary teachers may apply inappropriate strategies that lead to suboptimal learning outcomes. Therefore, this phenomenological study seeks to explore the strategies employed by elementary school teachers in addressing the challenges of teaching diverse learners and promoting inclusive learning environments.

II. METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to gather data addressing the research questions. Through in-depth interviews, participants were encouraged to share their experiences openly and honestly, allowing the researcher to capture the essence of their lived realities. The study adopted a descriptive-explanatory orientation, grounded in the principles of naturalistic inquiry as described by Hatch (2002). According to this perspective, authentic understanding emerges from lived experiences, which offer a more profound and contextualized grasp of a phenomenon than the objectivity commonly sought in quantitative methods.

The study explored the strategies of teachers in addressing the needs of diverse learners in the classroom. Eight (8) elementary grade teachers from a public school in Marilog B District, Division of Davao City, served as participants. They were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that each had at least three years of teaching experience at the elementary level. As Palinkas et al. (2015) note, purposive sampling is a widely recognized technique in qualitative research for identifying information-rich participants who can provide in-depth perspectives on the phenomenon under study. This approach ensured that participants' insights were grounded in their practical experiences and professional expertise.

Because the study involved teachers within the researcher's school, the possibility of hesitation or reluctance to disclose information was anticipated. To mitigate this concern and uphold the study's integrity, several ethical measures were implemented to promote trust and transparency. Following the ethical principles outlined by Mack et al. (2005), respect for persons, beneficence, justice, informed consent, and confidentiality, participants were assured of voluntary participation and anonymity. These safeguards fostered openness and ensured that the data collected were both authentic and ethically obtained.

The researcher played a central role in ensuring the credibility and authenticity of the study's findings. Responsibilities included facilitating interviews and discussions guided by the research questions and follow-up probes, transcribing the data personally, and performing a detailed analysis of the transcripts. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, codes, and emerging themes from participants' narratives. Each theme was carefully interpreted to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher's role extended to connecting and interpreting findings in light of the participants' lived experiences, thereby constructing meaningful insights that brought depth and texture to the phenomenological inquiry.

Data analysis involved an intensive and systematic review of the interview transcripts. Guided by the analytical framework of Dewalt and Dewalt (2002), the process followed an iterative cycle of reading, thinking, and writing, then rereading, rethinking, and rewriting. This recursive approach allowed the researcher to categorize, organize, and synthesize large volumes of qualitative data in a coherent and credible manner. Thematic Content Analysis, as described by Anderson (2007), served as the primary analytic strategy. This method provided a structured yet flexible way of describing and interpreting textual data drawn from participants' reflections and experiences.

Throughout the analytic process, the researcher adhered to the principles articulated by Rossman and Rallis (2003), emphasizing sustained engagement with the study's framework, continuous analytic questioning, and iterative writing. Analytic memos, reflective notes, and conceptual

diagrams were employed to record insights and to track the emergence of themes. Regular reflection on the literature and ongoing discussions with peers and participants contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the data. This reflective and interpretive process enabled the themes to evolve organically, leading to findings that genuinely reflected the participants' lived experiences and the complexity of teaching diverse learners.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Guided by the study's framework and interview matrix, this research explored the strategies employed by elementary school teachers in teaching diverse learners. The in-depth interviews were conducted during the participants' available time and at their convenience to ensure comfort and openness. Based on the information gathered, two main themes emerged regarding the strategies used by teachers: peer learning and project-based learning:

➤ *Peer Learning*

Peer learning emerged as a significant strategy among the participants. This approach involves students learning with and from one another through cooperative activities such as student-led workshops, study groups, peer tutoring, and collaborative tasks. The participants emphasized that peer learning fosters deeper understanding and engagement among students. According to Western Governors University (2022), peer learning strengthens knowledge retention, as explaining concepts to peers reinforces comprehension. When learners verbalize their understanding, they not only consolidate their learning but also develop essential interpersonal skills. Peer learning encourages teamwork, cooperation, patience, and social competence. In a collaborative learning environment, students' individual strengths complement one another, leading to shared academic success. Moreover, early exposure to peer-based learning helps cultivate social adaptability, communication, and leadership, skills essential for success in school and beyond.

➤ *Project-Based Learning*

Another commonly employed strategy among the participants was project-based learning (PBL). Teachers found this approach highly effective in addressing the varied learning needs of students. As PowerSchool (2023) explains, PBL is an instructional method that enables learners to acquire knowledge and skills through active engagement in projects that mirror real-world challenges. This method situates learning in authentic contexts, helping students connect academic content with practical application. Similarly, Melvin (2022) describes PBL as a student-centered approach that encourages exploration through curriculum-related questions or problems. The participants noted that PBL allows students to demonstrate creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking. Furthermore, it helps diverse learners engage meaningfully with content by allowing them to work according to their abilities and interests, thereby promoting inclusivity in learning.

However, despite the teachers' efforts to employ various strategies to address classroom diversity, challenges remained. From the interviews, two primary themes emerged concerning the difficulties teachers faced: bullying and lack of motivation among students:

➤ *Bullying*

The participants reported that bullying was a persistent issue within the classroom, even during lessons that emphasized inclusivity. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (2020) defines bullying as a repeated and intentional form of aggression characterized by an imbalance of power. Unlike isolated acts of aggression, bullying involves deliberate harm or intimidation of weaker peers and often occurs in school settings such as hallways, cafeterias, or playgrounds. The participants observed that bullying disrupts the learning environment and affects both the victims' and bystanders' sense of safety. It poses challenges to teachers' efforts in maintaining discipline and promoting inclusivity. Bullying not only undermines student motivation but also fosters a hostile classroom climate that hampers collaborative learning.

➤ *Lack of Motivation*

Another challenge identified by the participants was students' lack of motivation. Teachers observed that some learners appeared disengaged, inattentive, or unwilling to participate in classroom activities. Skedel (2021) explains that diminished motivation can stem from various life stressors such as family problems, academic pressure, or mental health concerns like depression or burnout. For diverse learners, these factors may compound existing challenges related to adjustment, confidence, or belongingness. The participants acknowledged that sustaining students' interest and enthusiasm is vital to promoting active participation and academic success. They noted that students who lack motivation often require additional encouragement and support through meaningful feedback and differentiated activities.

Beyond identifying strategies and challenges, this study also generated valuable insights that can guide teachers in creating more inclusive and supportive classroom environments. Teaching for diversity involves recognizing, respecting, and responding to students' varied backgrounds and learning needs. Inclusivity entails more than mere acknowledgment; it requires intentional actions that promote fairness, equality, and engagement. The study developed the following two key insights grounded in the experiences of the teacher-participants such as Strengthening School Anti-Bullying Campaigns and Promoting Positive Reinforcement in Classrooms. These insights underscore the need for continuous professional development and institutional support to help teachers effectively manage diversity in the classroom. Overall, this study contributes to the growing discourse on inclusive education by presenting practical strategies and reflections that can inform policy, training, and classroom practice.

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