



VOICES FROM INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF GRADE 7 TEACHERS HANDLING LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Digal, Eva J., Navarro, Blessed Jean V., Gulam, Edward Ryan F.

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a global priority. However, its implementation presents significant challenges. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Grade 7 teachers handling learners with learning difficulties. We identify key structural and pedagogical barriers that hinder effective teaching. Findings reveal that large class sizes, diverse ability levels, and chronic time constraints severely impact teacher well-being. Furthermore, they reduce overall instructional quality. Systemic support and institutional safety nets are vital. They protect educators and sustain inclusive programs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has rightfully become a global priority. It emphasizes the fundamental right of all learners, including those with learning difficulties, to access quality education within mainstream classrooms. Despite this noble goal, the actual implementation of inclusive practices encounters substantial challenges worldwide. A major obstacle for general education teachers is the glaring lack of adequate institutional support. This deficit severely limits their capacity to effectively implement transformative and inclusive teaching strategies.

Across different countries, the struggles are varying but closely related. In Qatar, for example, national commitments aligned with the Qatar National Vision 2030 strongly drive inclusive education. Yet, ongoing challenges continue to hinder successful implementation. Studies highlight persistent gaps in teacher training, institutional support, and resource availability. Similar issues echo loudly in England and Malaysia. Teachers face insufficient financial resources, overcrowded classes, increased workloads, and severe time constraints.

In the Philippine context, public school teachers experience significant hurdles when handling learners with learning difficulties. They grapple with insufficient training, limited professional development, and a lack of instructional materials. Furthermore, parental acceptance remains a barrier. This inevitably affects effective collaboration between teachers and parents. Despite these persistent issues, there is a noticeable lack of in-depth studies exploring the lived experiences of Grade 7 teachers in secondary schools. This highlights the urgency and relevance of our research. Grounded in Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, this study seeks to understand the challenges, strategies, and insights of Grade 7 teachers.

2. METHODS

This research utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach. It was designed to thoroughly capture the nuanced, lived experiences of Grade 7 teachers working in inclusive

classrooms. We focused specifically on educators handling learners with learning difficulties. The phenomenological lens allowed us to deeply explore the subjective realities of these teachers. Data collection involved exploring the insights gained by the participants, guided by specific research questions. We asked about the core challenges they face, the instructional strategies they employ, and the lessons that can inform future inclusive practices.

3. RESULTS

Our empirical findings reveal several overwhelming impediments that restrict effective inclusive teaching. The primary themes that emerged encompass both structural and pedagogical challenges:

- **Having Large Class Sizes:** Managing large classes is an overwhelming structural impediment. Participants reported that overcrowding severely restricts their ability to provide individualized instruction. Class sizes often exceed 40 students. This triggers intense workplace pressure. Ultimately, it leads to rapid physical exhaustion and professional burnout.
- **Facing Different Ability Levels:** Teachers described extreme pedagogical tension. They must address highly discrepant learning profiles within a single room. A core frustration involves balancing instructional time. Teachers struggle to divide attention between advanced learners and students who lack foundational competencies, such as reading simple directions or working independently. This vast gap forces an over-reliance on peer assistance. It also leaves educators feeling deeply isolated when parental support at home is absent.
- **Lacking Enough Time:** Time deficiency is a persistent barrier. It cuts across all aspects of inclusive instructional execution. Brief class periods force teachers to make rushed adjustments and drop planned pacing sequences. Consequently, they compromise on the continuous implementation of differentiated tasks.



4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly align with recent global macro-analyses. Classroom demographic inflation directly undermines the viability of inclusive educational mandates. When student-to-teacher ratios cross manageable baseline thresholds, regular education teachers become consumed by crowd control. They must focus on macro-level classroom management rather than precise academic monitoring, significantly heightening their intention to exit the profession. In the Philippine public school context, these excessive numbers erode a teacher's capacity to track individual milestones. Daily teaching becomes a mere exercise in survival under systemic pressure.

Furthermore, addressing wide variances in student capability is a powerful predictor of low teacher self-efficacy. Teachers must simultaneously address extreme academic gaps and unaddressed behavioral needs. Without structured institutional or familial safety nets, the cognitive and instructional load shifts entirely onto the individual educator. This inevitably leads to fragmented lessons and severely reduced instructional quality.

Chronic time scarcity also drastically compromises an educator's professional well-being and adaptive performance. The rigid structure of the standard school day simply fails to accommodate the slower processing speeds and diverse learning paces of students with special needs. As a result, teachers are forced to rely on rushed, short-term workarounds. This constant pressure prevents them from delivering the thorough scaffolding required for genuine inclusive learning.

To survive these demands, having teacher self-care is essential. Deliberate self-care, regular rest, and drawing emotional strength from faith and compassion help manage the high demands of inclusive teaching. Teachers note that without intentional boundaries and peer support, the heavy workload quickly leads to professional burnout. Institutional safety nets must be established to protect educators from severe career exhaustion. Protecting a teacher's mental health through systemic support is not just a wellness measure. It is an absolute structural requirement for keeping instructional quality stable in mainstream classrooms.