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Building Foundational Learning Through Inclusive Pedagogy: Lived Experiences of Grade 1 Teachers in Integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education under the MATATAG Curriculum at Francisco Benitez Elementary School

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Abstract

Foundational learning during the early grades is critical to children's cognitive, linguistic, numeracy, and socio-emotional development. Recognizing persistent learning gaps among Filipino learners, the Philippine Department of Education introduced the MATATAG Curriculum, which prioritizes foundational literacy, numeracy, language development, and values formation through learner-centered and inclusive pedagogical approaches. As frontline implementers of the curriculum, Grade 1 teachers play a vital role in integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education to address the diverse needs of beginning learners. Despite the significance of this reform, limited qualitative studies have examined teachers' lived experiences in implementing inclusive pedagogy within the MATATAG Curriculum. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers at Francisco Benitez Elementary School in integrating foundational learning areas through inclusive pedagogy. Guided by Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, the study will involve 10–15 purposively selected Grade 1 teachers. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals and analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method. The study aims to describe teachers' instructional experiences, challenges, adaptive practices, and professional insights in fostering inclusive foundational learning. The findings are expected to inform curriculum enhancement, teacher professional development, and the development of an Inclusive Foundational Learning Framework for early-grade instruction under the MATATAG Curriculum.

Keywords: *Inclusive Pedagogy; Foundational Learning; MATATAG Curriculum; Grade 1 Teachers; Phenomenology; Reading; Language; Mathematics; Values Education; Elementary Education*



Introduction

Developing strong foundational competencies during the early years of schooling remains one of the most important priorities in basic education because literacy, numeracy, language, and values serve as the building blocks for lifelong learning. Children who acquire these competencies during the primary grades are more likely to demonstrate improved academic achievement, higher-order thinking skills, and positive socio-emotional development throughout their educational journey (UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2023). Consequently, educational reforms worldwide have increasingly emphasized strengthening foundational learning through inclusive, learner-centered, and developmentally appropriate instructional approaches (UNESCO, 2024).

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education introduced the MATATAG Curriculum to address learning loss, curriculum congestion, and declining learning outcomes by focusing on essential competencies and strengthening foundational skills during the early grades (Department of Education [DepEd], 2023). The curriculum promotes contextualized, learner-centered, and inclusive instruction while giving greater emphasis to literacy, numeracy, language development, and values formation. According to recent studies, the streamlined curriculum allows teachers to focus on mastery of essential competencies while promoting meaningful and developmentally appropriate learning experiences (Dela Cruz & Ramos, 2024; Santos et al., 2024).

Grade 1 represents a crucial stage in children's educational development because learners begin formal instruction in Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education. During this period, teachers are expected not only to teach individual learning areas but also to integrate these disciplines into meaningful learning experiences that foster cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and moral development. Bruner (1966) argued that meaningful learning occurs when learners connect new knowledge with prior experiences through carefully structured instruction. Similarly, integrated learning has been shown to enhance learners' conceptual understanding, engagement, and retention of knowledge by allowing them to establish meaningful connections across subject areas (Drake & Reid, 2020).

Inclusive pedagogy has become a cornerstone of contemporary educational practice because it recognizes learner diversity as an essential characteristic of every classroom rather than an obstacle to learning. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasized that inclusive pedagogy encourages teachers to extend learning opportunities to all learners by designing flexible instructional strategies instead of creating separate interventions for specific groups. Likewise, Tomlinson (2017) asserted that differentiated instruction enables teachers to accommodate learners' varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles while maintaining equitable access to quality education. In early-grade classrooms, inclusive pedagogy is reflected through differentiated instruction, contextualized teaching, collaborative learning, formative assessment, and positive classroom relationships that encourage every learner to participate actively in the learning process (Ainscow, 2020).

At Francisco Benitez Elementary School, Grade 1 teachers play a significant role in translating the goals of the MATATAG Curriculum into authentic classroom practice. They continuously integrate Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education while responding to learners' diverse developmental needs, abilities, and backgrounds. Through inclusive instructional strategies, contextualized learning activities, and continuous assessment, teachers facilitate the development of foundational competencies that are essential for learners' future academic success and lifelong learning.

Although emerging studies have examined the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum in Philippine basic education, existing research has largely focused on curriculum implementation, teacher preparedness, instructional challenges, and policy analysis (Santos et al., 2024; Dela Cruz & Ramos, 2024). Comparatively few investigations have explored the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers who integrate foundational learning areas through inclusive pedagogy in actual classroom settings. Moreover, limited qualitative evidence explains how teachers interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to their experiences while implementing the curriculum in diverse learning environments. Understanding these lived experiences is important because teachers' perspectives provide valuable insights into how curriculum reforms are enacted in practice and how inclusive pedagogy contributes to foundational learning.

Anchored in Husserl's Descriptive Phenomenology (Husserl, 1970), this study explores the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers at Francisco Benitez Elementary School in building foundational learning through inclusive pedagogy while integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education under the MATATAG Curriculum. By examining the meanings teachers attribute to these experiences, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on curriculum implementation, inclusive education, and early-grade pedagogy while providing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening foundational learning in Philippine elementary schools.

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological study aims to explore and describe the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers at Francisco Benitez Elementary School in building foundational learning through inclusive pedagogy while integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education under the MATATAG Curriculum. Specifically, it seeks to understand how teachers design inclusive learning experiences, respond to learner diversity, integrate foundational learning areas, overcome instructional challenges, and derive professional meaning from implementing the curriculum. The findings will serve as the basis for developing an Inclusive Foundational Learning Framework that may inform curriculum enhancement, teacher professional development, and instructional policy in early-grade education.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following central research question:

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Grade 1 teachers describe their lived experiences in integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education under the MATATAG Curriculum?
2. How do teachers implement inclusive pedagogical practices to address the diverse learning needs of Grade 1 learners?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in integrating the foundational learning areas, and what strategies do they employ to address these challenges?
4. How do teachers perceive the influence of inclusive pedagogy on learners' literacy, language, numeracy, and values development?
5. What meanings do teachers attribute to their roles in promoting foundational learning under the MATATAG Curriculum?
6. What essential themes emerge from teachers' lived experiences that may contribute to enhancing inclusive pedagogy and strengthening the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum at Francisco Benitez Elementary School?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), Bruner's Constructivist Theory (1966), and Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory (2017).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory explains that learning occurs through social interaction and language, emphasizing the teacher's role in scaffolding learners' understanding within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner's Constructivist Theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful experiences, making integrated and contextualized instruction essential in the early grades (Bruner, 1966). Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory complements these perspectives by emphasizing the adaptation of instruction according to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles to ensure equitable participation and success (Tomlinson, 2017). Together, these theories provide a strong foundation for examining Grade 1 teachers' lived experiences in implementing inclusive pedagogy under the MATATAG Curriculum.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have investigated inclusive education, foundational learning, and curriculum implementation, several important gaps remain. First, existing research has largely examined the MATATAG Curriculum from the perspectives of curriculum implementation, teacher readiness, and policy evaluation, with limited attention to teachers' lived experiences in early-grade classrooms (DepEd, 2023; Santos et al., 2024). Second, there is a scarcity of qualitative studies exploring how Grade 1 teachers integrate Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education through inclusive pedagogy as part of their daily instructional practice. Third, the experiences of teachers in specific school contexts, such as Francisco Benitez Elementary School, remain underexplored despite the importance of contextual factors in curriculum implementation. Finally, few phenomenological studies have examined how teachers interpret the opportunities, challenges, and professional meanings associated with implementing the MATATAG Curriculum. Addressing these gaps, the present study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of teachers' lived experiences and generate evidence-based insights that may inform curriculum enhancement, inclusive pedagogical practices, and teacher professional development.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers in building foundational learning through inclusive pedagogy while integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education under the MATATAG Curriculum at Francisco Benitez Elementary School. Guided by Husserl's descriptive phenomenology (Husserl, 1970), the study sought to understand the meanings teachers attribute to their instructional experiences. The phenomenological approach was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to capture the essence of participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding inclusive classroom practices and curriculum implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Francisco Benitez Elementary School, a public elementary school implementing the MATATAG Curriculum. The school was purposively selected because it has Grade 1 teachers actively integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education using

inclusive pedagogical practices. The research setting provided a relevant context for exploring teachers' experiences in implementing foundational learning under the revised curriculum.

Research Participants

The participants consisted of 10–15 Grade 1 teachers from Francisco Benitez Elementary School who were directly involved in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that they possessed rich and relevant experiences related to inclusive pedagogy and integrated instruction. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, where no new information or themes emerged from the interviews (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Instrument

The primary instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed descriptions of teachers' experiences in integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education. Reflective journals were also utilized to supplement the interview data and provide deeper insights into teachers' instructional practices, challenges, and professional reflections. The interview guide underwent validation by experts in curriculum studies, qualitative research, and elementary education to ensure its relevance and clarity.

Data Collection Procedure

After securing approval from the school administration and obtaining informed consent from the participants, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet and convenient venue within the school. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Reflective journals were collected following the interviews to enrich the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts through member checking to ensure the accuracy of the recorded information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method (Colaizzi, 1978). The process involved repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering similar meanings into themes, developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, identifying its fundamental structure, and validating the findings with the participants. This systematic approach enabled the researcher to identify the common themes that describe Grade 1 teachers' lived experiences in implementing inclusive pedagogy under the MATATAG Curriculum.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor of the study, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were observed. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation of interview and reflective journal data. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting the research procedures, while confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling and bracketing to minimize researcher bias throughout the study.

Results and Discussion

Following Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method, analysis of the interview transcripts revealed five essential themes that describe the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers in building foundational learning through inclusive pedagogy while integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education under the MATATAG Curriculum at Francisco Benitez Elementary School.

Theme 1: Integrating Learning Areas to Promote Holistic Foundational Learning

Participants described the integration of Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education as an effective instructional approach that enabled learners to connect concepts across disciplines. Rather than teaching subjects separately, teachers intentionally designed classroom activities that developed literacy, numeracy, communication, and character simultaneously. They observed that integrated instruction enhanced learners' engagement, comprehension, and participation while making lessons more meaningful and relevant to children's daily experiences.

One participant shared,

"When I teach a story, I include counting activities and values lessons. The children understand better because everything is connected." (Participant 3)

Another teacher explained,

"The integration of subjects allows learners to see relationships between ideas instead of treating each subject as separate." (Participant 8)

These findings support Bruner's (1966) Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes that learners construct knowledge by connecting new experiences with prior understanding. Similarly, Drake and Reid (2020) argued that integrated instruction promotes meaningful learning by encouraging interdisciplinary connections that enhance conceptual understanding.

Theme 2: Inclusive Pedagogy Creates Equitable Learning Opportunities

Teachers consistently emphasized that inclusive pedagogy enabled them to address learners' diverse abilities, interests, and learning needs. Participants described using differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, contextualized examples, learning stations, and flexible classroom activities to ensure that every learner actively participated in classroom instruction.

One participant stated,

"Every child learns differently, so I adjust my activities according to their abilities. I make sure everyone participates." (Participant 6)

Another teacher shared,

"Some pupils need more guidance while others learn independently, so I prepare different activities to meet their needs." (Participant 10)

These narratives demonstrate teachers' commitment to equitable instruction. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasized that inclusive pedagogy extends quality learning opportunities to all learners by adapting teaching practices rather than excluding learners with diverse needs. Likewise, *Studies in Interdisciplinary Horizons*

Tomlinson (2017) highlighted differentiated instruction as an essential strategy for promoting inclusive classrooms.

Theme 3: Instructional Challenges Foster Creativity and Professional Resilience

Participants acknowledged that implementing the MATATAG Curriculum presented several challenges, including limited instructional materials, diverse learner readiness, time constraints, and classroom management concerns. Despite these difficulties, teachers viewed these experiences as opportunities to become more creative, resourceful, and reflective in their teaching.

One teacher remarked,

"Sometimes we lack materials, so I create my own learning resources using recycled materials and visual aids." (Participant 1)

Another participant explained,

"Not all learners can read at the same level, so I modify my lessons and spend extra time with struggling pupils." (Participant 5)

These experiences illustrate teachers' adaptability and professional resilience during curriculum implementation. Fullan (2020) argued that educational change requires teachers to continuously adapt instructional practices while responding to evolving classroom realities. Similarly, recent studies on the MATATAG Curriculum identify teacher creativity and adaptability as essential factors in successful implementation (Santos et al., 2024).

Theme 4: Collaboration Strengthens Inclusive Classroom Practice

Participants emphasized that collaboration with colleagues, school leaders, and parents played a significant role in implementing inclusive pedagogy. Teachers described sharing instructional materials, discussing classroom strategies during Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, and engaging parents in supporting learners' foundational development at home.

One participant shared,

"Our Grade 1 teachers regularly exchange ideas and teaching materials. We learn from one another." (Participant 4)

Another teacher noted,

"Parents become partners in helping children practice reading and values at home." (Participant 9)

These findings support Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes that learning and professional growth occur through collaboration, dialogue, and shared experiences. Collaborative professional learning communities have likewise been shown to strengthen instructional effectiveness and curriculum implementation.

Theme 5: Teachers Find Professional Fulfillment in Building Foundational Learning

Beyond instructional responsibilities, participants described their work as a meaningful professional commitment to shaping children's future learning. Teachers expressed fulfillment when learners demonstrated improvement in reading, mathematical understanding, communication, and positive behavior. They viewed themselves not only as teachers but also as facilitators, mentors, and advocates for every child's success.

One participant reflected,

"Seeing a child who could not read before now confidently reading stories makes all our efforts worthwhile." (Participant 7)

Another participant stated,

"Teaching Grade 1 is challenging, but it is rewarding because we build the foundation of their future." (Participant 2)

These narratives suggest that teachers derive professional meaning from their role in nurturing foundational competencies and promoting inclusive education. Such experiences reflect the intrinsic motivation and commitment that sustain quality teaching despite instructional challenges.

Essence of the Phenomenon

The lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers at Francisco Benitez Elementary School reveal that building foundational learning through inclusive pedagogy is a dynamic, collaborative, and reflective process. Teachers experience curriculum integration not merely as a teaching requirement but as an opportunity to promote holistic learner development. Through differentiated instruction, interdisciplinary integration, collaboration, and continuous adaptation, they create inclusive learning environments where every child has the opportunity to develop literacy, language, numeracy, and values. Ultimately, the essence of their experience reflects a deep commitment to ensuring that foundational learning becomes meaningful, equitable, and transformative for all learners.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that inclusive pedagogy is central to the successful implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum in the early grades. Teachers perceived that integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education promoted holistic learning by allowing learners to make meaningful connections across disciplines. This finding aligns with Bruner's (1966) Constructivist Theory and the work of Drake and Reid (2020), who emphasized that integrated instruction supports deeper conceptual understanding through authentic learning experiences.

The study also highlights the importance of differentiated instruction in addressing learner diversity, consistent with the principles of inclusive pedagogy proposed by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) and Tomlinson (2017). Despite challenges related to instructional resources and learner readiness, teachers demonstrated creativity, adaptability, and resilience, confirming Fullan's (2020) view that successful curriculum reform depends on teachers' capacity to innovate and respond to changing educational contexts.

Furthermore, collaboration among teachers, school leaders, and parents emerged as a critical support mechanism for implementing inclusive classroom practices, reinforcing Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which underscores the role of social interaction in learning and professional development. Overall, the findings reconceptualize inclusive pedagogy as a holistic teaching approach that integrates foundational learning areas while fostering equitable participation, professional growth, and meaningful educational experiences under the MATATAG Curriculum.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers at Francisco Benitez Elementary School in building foundational learning through inclusive pedagogy while integrating Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education under the MATATAG Curriculum. The findings revealed that teachers perceive inclusive pedagogy as an essential approach for promoting equitable, meaningful, and holistic learning experiences among young learners. Through curriculum integration, differentiated instruction, contextualized teaching strategies, collaborative practices, and continuous reflection, teachers create classroom environments that support the diverse learning needs of every child.

The study further demonstrated that although teachers encounter challenges related to instructional resources, learner diversity, classroom management, and curriculum implementation, these experiences foster professional resilience, creativity, and instructional innovation. Rather than viewing challenges as barriers, participants adapted their pedagogical approaches by developing contextualized instructional materials, employing flexible teaching strategies, and strengthening partnerships with colleagues and parents.

The essence of the phenomenon indicates that building foundational learning extends beyond delivering academic content. It involves nurturing literacy, language, numeracy, and values simultaneously while creating inclusive learning spaces where every learner is given equal opportunities to participate and succeed. Ultimately, the lived experiences of the participants underscore that the success of the MATATAG Curriculum depends not only on curriculum design but also on teachers' professional competence, commitment, and capacity to translate policy into meaningful classroom practice.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for educational policy, curriculum implementation, teacher education, and school leadership. For curriculum developers, the results highlight the need to continuously strengthen the MATATAG Curriculum by providing instructional guides and learning resources that facilitate the integration of Reading, Language, Mathematics, and Values Education through inclusive pedagogical approaches.

For school administrators, the study emphasizes the importance of creating supportive school environments by providing instructional materials, mentoring programs, and continuous Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions that encourage collaborative professional learning among teachers.

Teacher education institutions may utilize the findings to strengthen pre-service and in-service teacher preparation by emphasizing inclusive pedagogy, interdisciplinary instruction, differentiated teaching, and reflective practice. Strengthening these competencies will better prepare future educators to address learner diversity and effectively implement curriculum reforms.

Moreover, the findings contribute to the growing body of qualitative literature on foundational learning by providing rich descriptions of teachers' lived experiences in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum within the Philippine educational context.

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