

Original Article

Navigating the Balance: Teachers' Experiences in Meeting Curriculum Demands and Providing Individualized Support for Students in DepEd Schools

Glacy Jean Palmero¹, Josephine Baguio^{1,*}

Received: 05 January 2026; Revised: 15 February 2026;
Accepted: 19 February 2026; Published: 22 February 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66074/HY43GT21>

Abstract

Public elementary teachers frequently navigate a tension between strict curriculum coverage and the need to support struggling learners. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how ten public school teachers in Davao City, Philippines, manage this conflict and its impact on their teaching practice and wellbeing. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed that educators face significant challenges stemming from curriculum rigidity, competing duties, and limited resources. To maintain instructional responsiveness, teachers utilize differentiated instruction, collaborative problem-solving with families, and strategic time management to carve out space for remediation. Although balancing these intense demands causes considerable stress and fatigue, teachers also experience a profound sense of purpose and develop adaptive teaching skills when their students succeed. Ultimately, findings suggest that fostering inclusive classrooms and safeguarding teacher wellbeing requires systemic curriculum flexibility, workload regulation, and targeted resource support.

¹ Graduate School,
Rizal Memorial
Colleges, Inc., Davao,
Philippines

* Correspondence:
josephinebbaguio@outlook.com

Volume 2, Issue 2,
June 2026

Keywords: curriculum demands, individualized support, phenomenology, teacher wellbeing, teacher workload

1. Introduction

Public elementary classrooms rarely contain learners who progress at the same pace. Teachers must complete mandated content, prepare learners for periodic assessments, and submit documentation that demonstrates compliance with policy

requirements. At the same time, they respond to learners who struggle with foundational skills, language barriers, irregular attendance, or limited home support. In this context, curriculum pacing can conflict with inclusive practice because individualized scaffolds require added time, focused attention, and materials for practice and feedback. When teachers lack those conditions, support for struggling learners can become brief, episodic, and dependent on teacher improvisation.

Teacher wellbeing research shows that sustained job demands relate to emotional exhaustion, reduced instructional efficacy, and a weaker capacity to sustain consistent classroom support. In one study, teacher emotional exhaustion and efficacy predicted patterns in student discipline sanctions, which suggests that teacher strain can influence classroom climate and the quality of behavior supports that learners receive (Eddy et al., 2020). Workload conditions also matter in terms of stress. Evidence from a nationwide survey linked higher student teacher ratios with longer working hours and greater workload stress (Hojo, 2021). When time is scarce, teachers can face a recurring choice between progressing through content and providing careful remediation.

Resource constraints compound time pressure. Individualized support often depends on leveled texts, manipulatives, printed practice materials, and tools that help teachers monitor progress and provide timely feedback. When these resources are insufficient, teachers improvise, borrow, or purchase materials using personal funds, which can increase fatigue and make support uneven across learners. Resource scarcity can also reduce cognitive bandwidth for planning and reflection. Research on scarcity mindset among teachers indicates that perceived lack of time and social resources can negatively affect cognition and behaviors, which can reduce the quality of instructional decision making under pressure (Denti et al., 2024).

Teachers respond to constraints through adaptive instruction and collegial support. Differentiated instruction provides a practical approach for heterogeneity because it allows teachers to adjust tasks, pacing, and supports to learner readiness and need. Yet differentiated instruction requires planning time and ongoing adjustment, which can add pressure when time and materials are limited. Evidence suggests that teachers can perceive differentiated instruction as beneficial while they also report that it can be stressful in practice, especially when they lack support structures (Pozas et al., 2023). Understanding how teachers apply differentiation in real classrooms therefore requires attention to the conditions that enable or hinder it.

Time management routines can help teachers protect short windows for remediation and feedback. A meta-analysis reported that time management relates moderately to performance and wellbeing and shows a negative association with distress (Aeon et al., 2021). Effective time use can help teachers prioritize tasks, avoid last minute pressure, and allocate brief periods for one-on-one support. However, time management cannot substitute for structural supports because teachers still operate under pacing expectations, workload policies, and resource constraints. As a result, the way teachers experience curriculum demands is likely to shape both their instructional choices and their wellbeing.

Within the Philippine public-school context, teachers manage expectations tied to national curriculum policy and local school demands, often amid limited resources. Work from Philippine settings has described the complexity of teaching roles under constrained conditions, where instruction intersects with documentation and multiple school assignments (Bongala et al., 2020). Despite this context, there remains a need for qualitative accounts that focus on how teachers experience the tension between curriculum coverage and individualized student support. The present study addressed that need by examining teachers' experiences in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City, with attention to challenges, coping strategies, and implications for wellbeing and teaching effectiveness.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to examine teachers' experiences of curriculum implementation alongside individualized student support in public elementary schools in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City, Philippines. Phenomenology supports detailed description of shared meanings and common structures of experience within a specific context. The approach aligned with the study focus on teachers' daily judgments, pressures, and adaptations as they met coverage expectations and addressed learner needs.

Purposive sampling guided participant selection to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research aims (Patton, 2002). Ten participants were recruited from a pool of seventeen public elementary teachers in Tibungco District. Inclusion criteria required at least three years of teaching experience and direct involvement in supporting learners who needed additional guidance through remediation, differentiated tasks, or other forms of academic support. Participants were assigned codes P1 to P10 to protect identity and to support clear presentation of evidence.

Data collection relied on semi-structured, in-depth interviews, an approach that supports detailed accounts while allowing flexible probes for examples and clarification (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview guide focused on curriculum pacing and coverage, time allocation across instructional and non-instructional duties, perceptions of resource sufficiency, approaches to individualized support, and perceived effects on wellbeing and teaching effectiveness. Interviews were conducted in settings that protected privacy, were audio recorded with consent, and were transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterned meanings across the dataset through iterative familiarization, coding, theme development, and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher read transcripts repeatedly, generated initial codes that captured constraints, actions, and effects, and then grouped codes into candidate themes that represented shared experience. Themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and clear boundaries among concepts. The

final thematic structure supported a results section organized by research aims, with concise summaries of evidence and exemplar quotations.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study applied strategies aligned with qualitative quality criteria, including documentation of analytic decisions, thick description, and attention to fit between evidence and interpretation (Adler, 2022). Participants received a brief summary of interpreted themes and offered feedback on wording and emphasis, which the researcher incorporated when it clarified intent. Ethical safeguards followed principles of respect, beneficence, and justice described in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Data handling procedures also followed the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

3. Results

3.1 Challenges in Balancing Curriculum Demands and Individualized Support

Theme 1: Curriculum Rigidity

Participants described a fixed pacing structure that limited lesson adjustment for learners who required repeated explanation, slower progression, or added scaffolds. Teachers reported that strict coverage expectations created early pressure, especially when they faced classes with wide differences in readiness. They mentioned:

“The curriculum is fixed, and sometimes it is hard to adjust depending on the needs of the students.” (P5)

“The curriculum provided by DepEd really does not fit students who need special attention.” (P8, translated)

“We feel pressure early because we must follow the curriculum, yet there are also children who need special attention.” (P7)

Theme 2: Time Constraints

Teachers emphasized limited instructional time because documentation, reports, lesson preparation, and other duties competed with remediation and one on one support. They noted that the time pressure reduced follow through on individualized plans even when they knew which learners needed extra help. They stated:

“It is hard to manage time. There are many tasks, and you still need to focus on students who need extra help.” (P9)

“Sometimes there is no time to give individualized support because we still need to prepare lesson plans and reports.” (P2)

"Time is always limited, and I cannot always provide the support needed for every student." (P1)

Theme 3: Resource Limitations

Participants linked individualized support to the availability of learning materials, technology, and basic classroom resources. When resources were insufficient, teachers improvised or used personal funds, which constrained the consistency and reach of support strategies. They verbalized:

"We do not have enough learning materials for all students, especially those who need extra support." (P3)

"Sometimes, we have to use our own money to buy materials because the school cannot provide enough." (P10)

"When there are no materials, I really struggle to provide individualized support. Our resources are limited." (P6)

3.2 Coping Strategies

Theme 1: Differentiated Instruction

Teachers described deliberate variation in tasks, activities, and pacing based on learner level, which helped them provide targeted help without abandoning class progress. They framed differentiation as a practical response to mixed ability classrooms rather than a formal program requirement. They mentioned:

"I adjust my teaching style by using different activities for students with different levels. It helps them understand better." (P1)

"I try to give extra tasks to students who need more help while continuing with the lesson for others." (P4)

"I create different activities depending on the child's level. Not all are the same because some really need more guidance." (P8)

Theme 2: Collaborative Efforts

Participants relied on informal teamwork with colleagues and on coordination with parents to extend learner support beyond what one teacher could provide alone. They viewed collaboration as essential when workload and learner needs exceeded individual capacity. They verbalized:

"I ask my co teachers for help, especially when I have too many tasks." (P2)

"We work together as a team to share ideas and strategies for supporting students." (P7)

"I cannot manage alone, so I ask help from other teachers and parents to support the child." (P5)

Theme 3: Time Management Techniques

Teachers described planning routines that prioritized urgent tasks and protected short periods for remediation or feedback. They used schedules, checklists, and early preparation to reduce last minute pressure and to keep some focus on learners who needed extra support. They stated:

"I prioritize my tasks and focus on what needs to be done first. It helps me manage my time better." (P6)

"I try to schedule time for individual support, even if it is just a few minutes each day." (P3)

"I plan my tasks ahead and set a schedule so I do not get confused and I can still help the children." (P9)

3.3 Insights on Professional Wellbeing and Teaching Effectiveness

Theme 1: Stress and Burnout

Participants described fatigue and mental strain that arose from sustained multitasking and pressure to meet both curriculum coverage and learner support needs. They noted that the work intensity affected motivation and reduced the sense of control over daily routines. They mentioned:

"It is exhausting. There are days when I feel like I am constantly running around, trying to balance my responsibilities, and I just cannot keep up with everything." (P2)

"Sometimes I feel mentally drained, trying to meet the needs of my students while ensuring I deliver the curriculum on time." (P5)

"The fatigue and stress from many tasks often push us to lose motivation for work." (P7)

Theme 2: Job Satisfaction and Sense of Fulfillment

Despite strain, teachers described strong purpose when learners improved, particularly those who initially struggled. They framed student progress as a key reason they sustained effort even when systemic constraints remained unresolved. They verbalized:

"It is hard, but when I see my students succeed, it makes everything worth it. That is the satisfaction that keeps me going." (P3)

"Being able to see the improvement of my students, especially those who were struggling, gives me a sense of fulfillment and purpose in my work." (P8)

"Despite the difficulties, I still feel happy when I see my students' progress." (P9)

Theme 3: Enhanced Teaching Skills and Professional Growth

Teachers reported that the need to balance demands pushed them to expand their strategy use, become more resourceful, and refine relationships with learners. They described ongoing learning through trial, reflection, and adaptation, which improved confidence and classroom connection. They stated:

"The challenge of balancing both has forced me to become more creative in my teaching. I am constantly finding new ways to engage my students." (P4)

"I feel like I am learning and improving every day. The experience has made me a better teacher, and I am able to connect with my students on a deeper level." (P7)

"By facing these difficulties, I learned new ways to teach and I improved my skills." (P8)

4. Discussion

The findings show how curriculum coverage expectations can constrain instructional responsiveness when learner readiness varies widely. Participants described curriculum rigidity as pressure to follow a fixed pace even when some learners needed slower explanation, added practice, and guided feedback. Such pressure can narrow teacher discretion in lesson timing and task selection. When teachers must move forward despite persistent learning gaps, they may shorten remediation cycles, reduce depth of feedback, and limit practice opportunities, which can weaken inclusive outcomes for learners who require additional support.

Time scarcity emerged as a central mechanism that linked curriculum pressure with reduced individualized support. Teachers described competing duties such as lesson preparation, documentation, reports, and other school assignments that limited direct instructional time for remediation. Empirical evidence supports this pattern. Hojo (2021) found that higher student teacher ratios related to longer working hours and greater workload stress, which aligns with participants' descriptions of extended workdays and persistent time pressure. When teachers operate under time scarcity, the

goal of individualized support can shift from sustained scaffolding to short, reactive assistance.

Resource limitations shaped the feasibility of individualized support and the quality of instructional adaptation. Teachers described insufficient materials and limited access to instructional tools, which required improvisation and personal spending. Beyond material access, scarcity can affect cognition. Denti et al. (2024) reported that resource scarcity among teachers aligned with a scarcity mindset that negatively affected cognition and behaviors. In the current study, resource limitations reduced the range of learning activities and practice materials that teachers could offer, which likely increased reliance on lecture, whole-class tasks, and teacher generated materials.

The coping themes show how teachers attempted to preserve inclusive practice within constrained conditions. Differentiated instruction served as a practical response to heterogeneity because it allowed teachers to adjust tasks and supports based on learner readiness. At the same time, differentiated instruction can require more planning and classroom management because teachers must prepare multiple task versions and track progress across groups. Pozas et al. (2023) reported that differentiated instruction related to teacher stress and job satisfaction, indicating both benefits and burdens. The present findings suggest that differentiation is most feasible when teachers have time, materials, and collegial support.

Collaboration functioned as a resource that expanded teacher capacity. Participants described seeking help from colleagues and coordinating with parents to extend learner support beyond what one teacher could provide alone. García-Martínez et al. (2021) synthesized evidence that teacher collaboration supports school success and emphasized communication, openness, and participation as conditions that sustain shared work. In this study, collaboration appeared as both practical support, such as sharing strategies, and relational support that reduced isolation. Strengthening collaborative routines at the school level may therefore help teachers sustain individualized support without raising workload to unsustainable levels.

Time management routines appeared as an individual level coping mechanism that helped teachers protect brief windows for remediation and feedback. Aeon et al. (2021) found that time management related to wellbeing and showed a negative association with distress, which suggests that skillful time use can buffer pressure in demanding roles. In this study, teachers used schedules, prioritization, and advance planning to maintain order in daily routines and to keep essential instructional tasks from being displaced by urgent administrative requests. These routines likely reduced cognitive load and helped teachers maintain attention to learners who needed added guidance.

The wellbeing findings were mixed, which suggests that teacher experience in constrained contexts includes both strain and meaning. Participants reported stress and fatigue, yet they also described satisfaction when learners progressed and professional growth through expanded strategy use. Evidence indicates that teacher wellbeing matters for learners. Carroll et al. (2021) reported that reductions in teacher distress

and burnout in wellbeing programs coincided with improved student perceptions of teacher support. These results reinforce the importance of interventions and policies that protect teacher wellbeing as part of a broader strategy for inclusive and effective teaching.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study documented how public elementary teachers in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City experienced the tension between curriculum coverage and individualized student support. Teachers identified curriculum rigidity, time constraints, and resource limitations as interconnected barriers that reduced the depth and consistency of support for learners who needed added guidance. In response, they relied on differentiated instruction, collaboration with colleagues and families, and purposeful time management routines to sustain learner support within limited conditions. The findings indicate that efforts to improve inclusive classroom practice should include curriculum flexibility, workload regulation, and targeted resource provision, alongside school structures that promote collaboration and protect teacher wellbeing.

Acknowledgment

Sincere appreciation is given to all peer reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, which helped the author to improve the quality of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Author Contributions: Palmero, G.J., Baguio, J.; Study design, method conception, data collection, data analysis and manuscript writing