

Original Article

## **Embracing Diversity: Lived Experiences of Beginning Elementary Teachers in Supporting Learners with Emerging Needs**

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### **Abstract**

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of beginning public elementary school teachers in supporting learners with emerging needs in Tarragona Central District, Division of Davao Oriental. Eleven participants were interviewed in depth, and their narratives were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that participants navigated a complex landscape of challenges, particularly concerning instructional adaptation, heavy workloads, and relational and emotional dynamics. To navigate these hurdles, the teachers employed adaptive coping mechanisms, relying heavily on differentiated instruction, the integration of supplementary materials, and strategies designed to empower and engage students. Through these experiences, the educators developed profound professional insights centered on the importance of continuously monitoring student progress, fostering holistic growth, and engaging in reflective teaching practices. Ultimately, beginning teachers described inclusive classroom work as demanding yet inherently meaningful, requiring flexibility, sustained effort, and relationship-centered support. These findings offer practical implications for school administrators and policymakers to strengthen professional development, resource provision, and targeted support for inclusive elementary classrooms.

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## **1. Introduction**

Beginning elementary teachers enter classrooms at a time when learner diversity is increasingly visible and instructional expectations are becoming more complex. In inclusive classroom settings, novice teachers are expected to deliver curriculum content while also responding to learners who show emerging academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional needs. These responsibilities require not only content knowledge but also adaptive pedagogy, classroom management, emotional regulation, and sustained relationship-building with learners and families (Jabri et al., 2025; Llorent et al., 2024).

The challenge is especially significant in public elementary schools where resource limitations, class size, and uneven access to specialist support can intensify the demands of inclusive teaching. Beginning teachers often need to make rapid instructional decisions while still developing professional identity and classroom routines. In such contexts, the gap between inclusive policy aspirations and classroom realities becomes highly visible in teachers' day-to-day work (Jabri et al., 2025; Gal et al., 2025).

Inclusive education remains a major policy and practice concern because equitable access to learning requires more than placement in general classrooms. It also requires teachers who can adapt instruction, monitor progress, and build safe and supportive learning environments for diverse learners. Recent scholarship continues to identify persistent barriers to inclusive practice, including workload pressures, limited training, and insufficient institutional support, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Jabri et al., 2025; Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025; Dreer, 2023).

For beginning teachers, these demands can be especially difficult because early-career educators are still developing confidence, routines, and practical strategies for differentiated teaching. At the same time, early experiences can become a foundation for professional growth, reflective practice, and stronger commitment to inclusive education. Research on teacher well-being and reflective development suggests that support, reflection, and perceived impact are important conditions for sustaining effective teaching practice and professional functioning (Dreer, 2023; Li et al., 2025).

The present study focuses on Tarragona Central District, Division of Davao Oriental, where beginning public elementary school teachers support learners with emerging needs in classroom settings that may be constrained by limited resources and support systems. A phenomenological approach is appropriate because it centers teachers' lived experiences and captures how they make sense of instructional adaptation, time demands, emotional pressures, and the meaning of supporting diverse learners in real contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

Specifically, this study examined three areas: the challenges beginning teachers faced in supporting learners with emerging needs, the coping strategies they used to

address these challenges, and the insights they gained through their teaching experiences. By foregrounding teachers' narratives, the study contributes evidence that can inform school leadership decisions, teacher induction support, and policy responses for inclusive and context-responsive elementary education.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of beginning public elementary school teachers in supporting learners with emerging needs in Tarragona Central District, Division of Davao Oriental. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because the inquiry sought to understand how teachers experienced, interpreted, and made meaning of the challenges and adaptations involved in inclusive classroom teaching. The study was aligned with a constructivist perspective, recognizing that participants' experiences were shaped by classroom interactions, school contexts, and evolving professional identities.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research aims. The study involved 11 beginning public elementary school teachers who had direct experience supporting learners with emerging needs in their classrooms. Inclusion criteria centered on early-career classroom teachers with at least one year of teaching experience and current engagement with learners showing emerging academic, behavioral, or socio-emotional needs. This strategy prioritized depth and contextual relevance rather than statistical representativeness.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was designed to align with the three research questions and elicited narratives on classroom challenges, coping practices, and professional insights related to inclusive teaching. The semi-structured format allowed consistency across interviews while preserving flexibility for follow-up probes, clarification, and examples of concrete classroom situations. This approach supported detailed accounts of instructional adaptation, time use, emotional responses, classroom interactions, and reflective decision-making.

Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to interviews. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely, and participant identities were protected through coding in all transcripts, analyses, and presented quotations. Interviews were conducted in settings that supported privacy and uninterrupted sharing.

Data analysis followed a thematic process within a phenomenological frame. The researchers repeatedly reviewed transcripts for familiarization, identified significant statements, generated initial codes, and clustered codes into themes aligned with the three research aims. Themes were reviewed for coherence and distinction,

then named and interpreted to reflect patterned meanings in the participants' experiences. The analysis was guided by contemporary reflexive thematic analysis principles, especially analytic iteration, transparency in decision-making, and careful theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Trustworthiness was strengthened through reflexive attention to interpretation, audit trail documentation, and close alignment of themes with participant quotations, consistent with recent guidance on qualitative rigor (Ahmed, 2024).

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Challenges*

##### **Theme 1: Instructional Adaptation**

Beginning teachers described difficulty modifying lessons and activities to accommodate learners with different ability levels, learning styles, and support needs. They emphasized that tailoring instruction required additional planning, flexible pacing, and creative adjustments, especially when resources were limited. They mentioned:

*"It's challenging to adjust activities so that every student, regardless of their ability, can participate and learn effectively." (P2)*

*"I often have to create additional materials to support learners who need extra help." (P4)*

*"Sometimes it is very difficult to customize the lesson because my students have different abilities." (P5)*

*"Resources are sometimes lacking, so I struggle to provide activities that are suitable for everyone." (P7)*

##### **Theme 2: Time Management and Workload**

Teachers reported that balancing lesson planning, classroom teaching, progress monitoring, and individualized support created heavy workload pressure. They noted that preparing additional materials and attending to learners with emerging needs reduced the time available for other classroom responsibilities. They stated:

*"Managing my time is hard because I need to prepare extra materials for students who need additional support." (P1)*

*"It's difficult to cover all lessons while also giving individualized attention to students with emerging needs." (P3)*

*"I have many responsibilities, so it is hard to prioritize students who need extra help." (P6)*

*"Sometimes there is not enough time for students who are struggling, even though I really want to help everyone." (P8)*

### **Theme 3: Emotional and Relational Challenges**

Beginning teachers described emotional strain in responding to learner struggles, classroom behavior issues, and the pressure to support all students effectively. They also emphasized the need to stay patient, positive, and supportive while maintaining strong relationships with learners. They verbalized:

*"Sometimes I feel frustrated when a student struggles, but I try to stay patient and supportive." (P4)*

*"It can be emotionally draining, yet rewarding when students make progress." (P7)*

*"Sometimes I feel stress because of a student's behavior, but I need to remain positive and encouraging." (P9)*

*"It is difficult at times to handle the pressure of helping everyone, but I always prioritize my relationship with the student." (P10)*

### **3.2 Coping Strategies**

#### **Theme 1: Differentiated Instruction**

Teachers described adapting teaching methods, grouping, pacing, and classroom activities to meet learners' varying needs and abilities. They emphasized flexible lesson implementation so that learners with emerging needs could receive focused support without excluding the rest of the class. They mentioned:

*"I try to use small group activities so that learners with emerging needs can receive focused attention." (P2)*

*"I modify my teaching pace depending on how quickly students grasp the concepts." (P4)*

*"Sometimes I group students based on their abilities so they can receive proper support." (P5)*

*"I adjust my teaching so I can sustain the interest and participation of everyone." (P7)*

#### **Theme 2: Use of Supplementary Materials**

Teachers relied on additional worksheets, flashcards, visual aids, and digital activities to address learning gaps and improve learner understanding. They described these supplementary materials as practical supports when standard resources were

insufficient or when learners required alternative ways to access content. They verbalized:

*"I prepare extra worksheets and visual aids to help students understand difficult concepts." (P1)*

*"Using colorful charts and pictures helps learners with emerging needs grasp the lesson more easily." (P3)*

*"I create additional materials like flashcards and visual aids for students who are struggling." (P6)*

*"Sometimes I search for online activities that can help learners who need additional support." (P8)*

### **Theme 3: Student Engagement and Empowerment**

Teachers emphasized involving students in goal-setting, classroom participation, self-expression, and explanation of understanding to build motivation and responsibility. They described empowerment-oriented strategies as important for sustaining learner participation and helping students become more active in their own learning. They stated:

*"I encourage students to set small learning goals so they feel motivated and responsible for their progress." (P4)*

*"I involve learners in classroom discussions and decision-making to increase engagement." (P9)*

*"I encourage students to explain their understanding so I can identify what they still need." (P7)*

*"Sometimes I provide activities where they can express their ideas and learning preferences." (P10)*

### *3.3 Insights*

#### **Theme 1: Monitoring and Evaluating Student Progress**

Teachers emphasized the importance of monitoring both academic performance and learner confidence to determine whether support strategies were effective. They used quizzes, oral questioning, class participation, outputs, and activity performance as ongoing indicators of progress. They mentioned:

*"I regularly check students' understanding through quizzes, oral questions, and class participation to see if my strategies are working." (P1)*

*"Success for me is when I notice students improving in areas they previously struggled with." (P3)*

*"I monitor student progress through their output and performance in activities." (P6)*

*"I can see that my strategy is effective when students become more confident in learning and understand the lesson better." (P8)*

## **Theme 2: Promoting Holistic Growth**

Teachers recognized that supporting learners with emerging needs involves socio-emotional growth, confidence-building, and responsibility development, not only academic improvement. They described success as seeing learners become more participative, resilient, and self-directed in class. They verbalized:

*"I feel successful when students show more confidence and actively participate in class." (P2)*

*"Helping students overcome challenges and see their own growth gives me a sense of achievement." (P4)*

*"I am happy when I see that students improve not only in academics but also in self-confidence and attitude." (P5)*

*"Sometimes I see students improve in managing their own learning and responsibilities." (P7)*

## **Theme 3: Reflective Teaching Practices**

Teachers highlighted reflection, peer feedback, and self-evaluation as important practices for improving support for learners with emerging needs. They described reviewing lesson outcomes and student responses to identify gaps and adjust future instruction. They stated:

*"After each lesson, I reflect on what worked and what didn't, then adjust my strategies accordingly." (P3)*

*"I seek feedback from peers and mentors to refine my teaching and better support my students." (P9)*

*"I evaluate myself to identify what is lacking in my teaching and what I can do better next time." (P6)*

*"Sometimes I review my lesson plans and student performance to see what needs improvement." (P10)*

## **4. Discussion**

The findings show that beginning teachers' experiences in supporting learners with emerging needs are shaped by the interaction of instructional demands, workload

pressure, and emotional labor. The challenge themes of instructional adaptation, time management and workload, and emotional and relational difficulties indicate that inclusive classroom support is not a single technical task but a complex professional responsibility that requires pedagogy, planning, and relational care. This interpretation is consistent with recent scholarship on inclusive education challenges, which identifies teacher preparedness, instructional planning, and systemic constraints as recurring barriers in classroom implementation (Jabri et al., 2025).

Instructional adaptation emerged as a central challenge because beginning teachers had to modify tasks, pace, and materials across learners with different abilities while still maintaining whole-class progress. Participants' narratives suggest that inclusive practice required continuous customization rather than occasional accommodation. This supports broader work on tailored instruction for diverse learner needs, which emphasizes ongoing assessment and flexible response as necessary components of effective teaching in heterogeneous classrooms (Jabri et al., 2025). For novice teachers, however, such adaptation appears to be especially demanding because it occurs alongside the development of basic classroom routines and teaching confidence.

Time management and workload also surfaced as major constraints, reflecting the practical burden of preparing additional materials, monitoring progress, and sustaining differentiated support while handling regular classroom responsibilities. The participants' accounts show that inclusive teaching was often experienced as added labor rather than a resourced instructional condition. This aligns with research on teacher well-being showing that high job demands and insufficient support are linked to strain, reduced instructional sustainability, and risks to professional functioning (Dreer, 2023; Aziku et al., 2024). The results therefore suggest that beginning teachers' inclusive practices should be understood not only in pedagogical terms but also in workload and well-being terms.

The emotional and relational challenge theme is particularly important because it shows that beginning teachers experienced inclusive teaching as emotionally demanding but also relationally meaningful. Participants described frustration, stress, and emotional drain, yet they repeatedly emphasized patience, encouragement, and positive relationships with learners. This pattern supports literature indicating that teacher-student relationships and emotional climate are central to classroom engagement and learning outcomes, and that teachers' ability to regulate stress while maintaining supportive interactions is critical in complex teaching settings (Dreer, 2023; Llorent et al., 2024).

The coping themes from Aim 2 provide a strong counterpoint to these challenges and show that beginning teachers actively developed practical strategies to sustain inclusive support. Differentiated instruction, use of supplementary materials, and student engagement and empowerment reflect adaptive professional judgment rather than passive survival. In particular, differentiated instruction and supplementary materials functioned as linked strategies: teachers adjusted instruction while also creating or sourcing additional tools to improve access to lessons. This pattern is

consistent with recent work on inclusive classrooms, which emphasizes flexibility in instruction and multiple means of engagement as key to supporting diverse learners (Jabri et al., 2025; Llorent et al., 2024).

The student engagement and empowerment theme extends the interpretation of inclusive support by showing that teachers did not frame learners only as recipients of intervention. Instead, participants described involving students in goal-setting, explanation, discussion, and expression of learning preferences. These strategies suggest that beginning teachers were building learner agency alongside academic support, which may strengthen motivation and participation. This interpretation is compatible with research showing that inclusive teaching practices can support social and emotional competencies when students are actively involved in learning processes (Llorent et al., 2024).

The insight themes from Aim 3 deepen the analysis by showing how beginning teachers evaluated and gave meaning to their work over time. Monitoring and evaluating student progress, promoting holistic growth, and reflective teaching practices indicate that participants were developing a broader professional understanding of success in inclusive classrooms. They did not limit success to content coverage or grades. Rather, they described success in terms of confidence, participation, self-management, and responsive instruction. This broader framing aligns with emerging perspectives that connect inclusive teaching with both academic and socio-emotional development in school settings (Llorent et al., 2024).

Reflective teaching practices were especially significant because they show how beginning teachers turned classroom experience into professional learning. Participants described reviewing lessons, analyzing student responses, and seeking feedback from peers or mentors to improve future instruction. This finding aligns with contemporary work on reflective practice in teacher development, which shows that structured reflection can strengthen pedagogical decision-making, confidence, and responsiveness to learner diversity (Li et al., 2025; Byrne, 2022). In the present study, reflection appears to function as both a coping process and a growth mechanism.

Taken together, the findings suggest that beginning teachers in Tarragona Central District enact an emerging model of inclusive elementary teaching that is adaptive, relationship-centered, and reflective, but also vulnerable to resource and workload constraints. For school leaders and policymakers, the results point to three priority areas: reducing practical barriers to instructional adaptation, strengthening induction and mentoring support, and creating school-level systems that protect teacher well-being while supporting inclusive practice. These supports are likely to improve both teacher sustainability and the quality of learning opportunities for learners with emerging needs.

## **5. Conclusion**

Beginning public elementary school teachers in Tarragona Central District described supporting learners with emerging needs as a complex and meaningful part

of early-career teaching. They faced recurring challenges in instructional adaptation, time management and workload, and emotional and relational demands, yet they responded through differentiated instruction, supplementary materials, and learner engagement and empowerment strategies. Their insights also highlighted the importance of monitoring progress, promoting holistic growth, and practicing reflection to improve teaching effectiveness. These findings support the need for stronger school-level resources, mentoring, and professional support systems that help beginning teachers sustain inclusive and responsive classroom practice.

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## **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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