

Teachers' Lived Experiences in the Transition to the MATATAG Curriculum: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Adaptation, Challenges, and Growth

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Abstract. This study seeks to explore teachers' lived experiences in transitioning to the MATATAG Curriculum amidst inadequate instructional materials, limited time for teaching, the diverse needs of learners, lack of teacher training, unclear implementation guidelines, heightened levels of stress, and the necessity to innovate in teaching. Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews with teachers from selected schools in Candijay, Bohol, were conducted to gain insight into challenges, strategies of adaptation, and professional growth. These have demonstrated that the curriculum was implemented inconsistently because of the vague guidelines and poor training, forcing the teachers to fall back on the old instructional materials and teaching methods. Again, the limitation in instructional time constrained their capacity to deliver quality education. Moreover, teachers found it hard to meet the diverse needs of learners due to insufficient resources and training. The study has underlined the requirement for more explicit curriculum guidelines, government support, enhanced teacher training, mental health interventions, and innovative teaching strategies. These challenges are aligned with UN SDG-4 on Quality Education, which ensures that educators and students experience inclusive, equitable, and effective learning. Strengthening systemic support will enhance the MATATAG Curriculum's sustainability and impact on Philippine education.

Keywords: Adaptation; Challenges; Growth; MATATAG curriculum; Transition.

1.0 Introduction

The MATATAG Curriculum, as it is being implemented by the Department of Education in the Philippines, is a significant shift in instructional strategies, assessment methods, and even the overall curricular content; hence, teachers must adapt to new pedagogical approaches. Literature on curriculum reforms points out that the successful introduction of a new curriculum requires institutional support, adequate teacher training, and teacher willingness to change (Fullan, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2021), although challenges in the form of resources, increased workload, and resistance to change are ubiquitous (Javier et al., 2019; Bernardo & Mendoza, 2020). Schleicher (2018) points out that limited instructional materials, mismatched training, and logistical constraints often impede curriculum reforms. Bautista et al. (2019) indicate that teachers may resist changes when

inadequately prepared. This would also bring about new opportunities for professional growth, in which teachers could sharpen their teaching strategies and firm up their professional identities (Guskey, 2002; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Most of the existing literature investigates the policy-level implications of curriculum reforms, while few studies center on the lived experiences of teachers who navigate these transitions within the Philippine context. Understanding their narratives will, therefore, be critical in crafting policies and support mechanisms that ensure effective curriculum delivery. Using a phenomenological approach, this study gives a voice to the educators, struggles, resilience, and growth that have emerged amid the MATATAG Curriculum change. In doing so, the study hopes to provide evidence-based insights for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher-training institutions on how these stakeholders can support educators during the curriculum reform period.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative design in nature—phenomenology—was used to examine teachers' lived experiences during the transition into the MATATAG Curriculum. Phenomenology emphasizes the description and interpretation of ways people experience certain phenomena, the process of teacher adaptation, challenges, and personal growth regarding curriculum change. Using this approach, the researchers managed to look into the innermost life experiences of teachers, considering their adjustment to the new circumstances, challenges they faced, and what strategies they worked out for themselves in coping with such changes to move on with their lives.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected schools within the municipality of Candijay, Bohol. Specifically, the research focused on La Union Elementary School, Tambungan Elementary School, and Cambane Elementary School. These schools were chosen due to their accessibility, relevance to the study, and representation of the educational context in the area.

2.3 Research Participants

In selecting participants, this qualitative-phenomenological study followed the suggestion of Creswell (2013) in using a sample size between five to ten. Heeding this proposal, participant teachers comprised eight from Kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 4, and Grade 7 from selected schools in Candijay, Bohol. Participants were purposively chosen to have diverse experiences of the MATATAG Curriculum implementation to get in-depth insights, which could also be sourced through In-Depth Interviews (IDIs). Therefore, the study focused on a small but purposeful sample to draw rich descriptive data reflecting teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of the curriculum transition. Selection criteria were used as the basis for the selection of participants. The criteria for inclusion stipulated that participants should be currently teaching the MATATAG Curriculum in the district of Candijay, specifically in Kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 4, and Grade 7 classrooms; have at least 5 to 7 years of teaching experience; and have had training or professional development regarding the MATATAG Curriculum to ensure that they would be able to reflect meaningfully on their experiences in adapting it.

2.4 Research Instrument

The study uses in-depth interviews (IDI) as the primary instrument to explore teachers' lived experiences navigating the transition to the MATATAG Curriculum. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized, featuring open-ended questions aligned with Creswell's (2013) framework for qualitative research. These questions focused on teachers' challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of professional growth during the curriculum transition. The semi-structured nature allowed flexibility, enabling participants to share detailed and personal insights. All interviews were conducted face-to-face to ensure a deeper and more personal understanding of the teachers' lived experiences during the transition to the MATATAG Curriculum.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The study adopted an organized manner in investigating teachers' personal experiences during the MATATAG Curriculum phase. Preparation included purposive sampling, in which participants were selected. Kindergarten, Grades 1, 4, and 7 teachers from selected Candijay, Bohol teachers were picked based on inclusion criteria. They were included if directly involved in the curriculum shift. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect qualitative data, assisted by open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences fully. This format was flexible enough to explore emerging themes while maintaining a structured approach to

data gathering. Recordings of interviews, with consent, were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the leading patterns and themes. The analysis focused on identifying challenges, coping mechanisms, and personal growth related to implementing the MATATAG Curriculum.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the study, with informed consent obtained and confidentiality and voluntary participation of the respondents ensured. Following this extensive process, the research captured rich insights into teachers' adaptive strategies and experiences, thus leading to valuable knowledge in understanding the implementation of curriculum reform. In this research, the ethical treatment of participants was given high priority, explicitly ensuring that participants would not be caused any harm or discomfort during the research process. Informed consent was sought from the respondents before the study was undertaken. It stated explicitly the purpose, procedures, and possible outcomes. The teachers, as participants in the transition to the MATATAG Curriculum in selected schools in Candijay, Bohol, were duly informed that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected; personal data was kept securely, and all were anonymized. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage without any repercussions. The entire research process involved open and truthful communication, transparency, and respect for the dignity and well-being of all the participants.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Lack of Learning Resources, Insufficient Time, Addressing Diverse Learners

The theme in this question comes from the specific research question: 'What specific challenges have you encountered in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum?' This theme encapsulates teachers' primary challenges while implementing the MATATAG Curriculum, reflecting the new system's multifaceted operational and pedagogical demands. These challenges hinder effective instruction, increase stress due to workload demands, and necessitate adaptive strategies that many teachers feel unprepared for. Derived from the research question, the theme highlights how these interconnected issues impact curriculum adoption. It underscores the importance of systemic support through improved resource allocation, professional development, and inclusive teaching policies to ensure the curriculum's success.

T7: "The challenges I have encountered are preparing instructional materials and handling diverse learners."

T6: "Time allotment challenges me a lot, especially in handling grade 1 and 2 learners. Not all competencies can be catered to in a day."

Recent local studies in the Philippines have pointed out that teachers face many challenges in curriculum implementation, particularly in the lack of resources, time constraints, and dealing with learners' diverse needs. Studies highlight disparities in access to educational resources between urban and rural areas and between high- and low-income communities (UNESCO, 2020). Rural schools often lack basic infrastructure, such as textbooks, internet access, and laboratories. Another study on special education in the City Division of Ilagan, Isabela, pointed out problems such as inadequate training of teachers in special education and a lack of resources designed for children with learning disabilities. These factors contributed to the generally poor quality of primary education in the area, especially in schools for children with learning disabilities (Magno & Dela Cruz, 2021). In addition, studies on implementing the MATATAG Curriculum highlighted that limited resources are the main challenge in the effective implementation of inclusive education in schools, which leads to unequal learning opportunities and outcomes among students with varying needs. Physical infrastructures in rural and isolated areas were one of the biggest challenges to implementing inclusive education (Santos & Reyes, 2023). These studies have implicated the continuing problem that Filipino teachers face regarding curriculum implementation: the necessity for adequate resources, enough time, and support to duly take care of the variegated concerns of the learners.

3.2 District-Level Training for Teacher-Implementors

The theme in this question comes from the specific research question: "What kinds of professional development or training have you received to assist in adapting to the MATATAG Curriculum?" This theme underscores the importance of district-level professional development programs in effectively preparing teachers to implement the MATATAG Curriculum. Teachers often rely on district-organized training sessions to gain the skills, knowledge, and strategies necessary to adapt to the new curriculum. However, the effectiveness of these training

programs can be influenced by various factors such as content relevance, instruction quality, and the sessions' timing.

T1: "Joining the District training on the MATATAG Curriculum for Teachers."

T2: "Joining the Enhance Content Pedagogy seminar."

Teachers face multiple challenges as they adapt to the new curriculum, including a need for better resources and more comprehensive training to manage diverse learners effectively. A study by the Department of Education (2024) discusses the importance of continuous training programs aligned with the MATATAG Curriculum's goals. These professional development initiatives enhance teachers' pedagogical skills and aim to reduce stress and improve overall teaching efficacy by ensuring educators are well-prepared to manage the curriculum's demands. Research has shown that well-structured professional development is crucial for curriculum adaptation, mainly when it involves complex changes like those found in the MATATAG Curriculum. The Philippine government supports various educational programs, specifically in basic education, to ensure that Filipino students receive quality education (Ampo, 2023). Studies indicate that when professional development is aligned with teachers' actual classroom needs and allows for practical application, it enhances their ability to implement the curriculum effectively (Guskey, 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). However, challenges such as limited training time and lack of follow-up support can diminish the overall impact of these programs (Liu, 2018).

3.3 Ambiguous Implementation of Guidelines

Without clear guidelines on its implementation, the MATATAG Curriculum ruins the promise of reforming the education system in this country. Without such guidelines, teachers and administrators are prone to inconsistent interpretations that might also lead to varied teaching practices and uneven learning outcomes. This gap affects teacher training, resource allocation, and monitoring processes simultaneously and hence makes it difficult to determine if there is uniformity and effectiveness. This will short-change the students because they may not fully realize the improvements that the curriculum has to offer. To this end, DepEd should provide detailed guidelines, intensive training, and transparent evaluation frameworks for successful implementation.

Research has shown that the reason many educational reforms are not successful is because of unclear policies and ambiguous implementation frameworks. Fullan (2020) points out that curriculum implementation is a complex process requiring systematic planning, clear communication, and adequate teacher support. When policies are ill-defined, educators find it challenging to interpret and apply them, resulting in inconsistent teaching methodologies across schools (Darling-Hammond, 2021). This inconsistency impacts learning quality since students in different schools receive varying levels of instruction. One such study on K-12 Transition in the Philippines by Bernardo and Mendoza, 2020, established that ambiguity in policy direction brought about tremendous confusion among teachers, particularly about assessment techniques and competency alignment. In support of this idea, Bautista et al., 2019, noted the lack of implementation details that hindered timely resource allocation for effective teacher training programs. These studies underline that results will not meet expectations when curriculum reforms are carried out without proper structuring of policies and necessary communication. Teachers' capacity for successful implementation of new curricula rests squarely on professional development and clear instructional frameworks (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

When curriculum changes are brought about without detailed implementation guidance, teachers are uncertain of pedagogical expectations. Consequently, this brings about disjointed instruction and ineffective strategies in teaching and learning (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Schleicher (2018) points out that well-structured curricular guidelines provide a base that will help build teachers' competencies in terms of the training needed for successful change realization. In the Philippine context, Javier et al. (2019) noted during the transition to the K-12 curriculum that teachers did not have standardized instructional materials and clear training modules, resulting in inconsistent teaching methods. The same is likely true for the MATATAG Curriculum unless the policymakers ensure that teachers have well-structured training and concrete guidelines before full implementation.

3.4 Innovative Teaching Strategies

The theme for this question emanates from the specific research question: "What are the coping strategies that you have found most effective in managing curriculum changes?" This theme highlights the coping strategies teachers

have found effective in managing the shifts in curriculum demands, focusing on integrating creative and adaptive teaching methods. Teachers have adopted innovative strategies for engaging students and addressing diverse learning needs effectively. These are important strategies in managing curriculum change complexity and help teachers make learning relevant and engaging for the students. Through these methods, teachers could be seen to have increased student participation, developed critical thinking, and improved general academic performance, thus making the implementation of the new curriculum successful. This theme underlines the importance of teacher creativity and flexibility when navigating curriculum transitions.

T3: "Using technology in various teaching"

T5: "Focus on fundamental skills, balance cognitive skills, reduce learning areas."

A study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) points out that project-based learning has been successfully implemented to improve student engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration. PBL makes it easier for students to apply what they have learned in real-world contexts, making the learning experience more relevant and active. This aligns with the emphasis on dynamic teaching strategies found in the MATATAG Curriculum. Moreover, as stated in the article by Mioduser et al. (2022), digital tools have been integrated into teaching, with results showing increased participation and better student academic performance. Technology enables teachers to facilitate learning more flexibly, adaptively, and engagingly, serving diverse learning styles.

3.5 Stress Reduction Strategies

This theme is derived from the research question: "What are the techniques or practices you use to manage stress related to these changes?". This theme discusses how teachers cope with stress linked to curriculum change, like that brought about by the MATATAG Curriculum. Teachers reported using various means to cope with the demands of these changes, from mindfulness practices to time management strategies and seeking support from peers. Mindfulness and relaxation exercises counteract immediate stress and increase clarity of mind; good time management allows teachers to balance their workload and not experience burnout, while collaborative support from colleagues affords them both emotional relief and practical advice in creating a shared space for problem-solving. The strategies are pertinent in helping educators negotiate the pressures of implementing a new curriculum, ensuring their well-being and continued effectiveness in the classroom. Teachers can maintain a positive teaching environment by managing stress, which means better outcomes for them and their students.

T1: "Seek professional guidance"

T4: "Breaking down the task, prioritizing self-care and setting boundaries, mindfulness and deep breathing techniques, and practicing flexibility and embracing imperfection."

Related research has emphasized how teachers might buffer the impact of curriculum changes, such as those brought about by the MATATAG Curriculum, through stress reduction strategies. In this line, mindfulness practices such as meditation and relaxation exercises significantly reduce stress and improve teachers' emotional resilience. A study by Roeser et al. (2013) found that mindfulness interventions decreased teachers' stress and emotional exhaustion but elevated well-being and job satisfaction. The authors added the role of mindfulness in enhancing teachers' self-regulation and resilience, resulting in improved classroom management and student motivation. Considering the interrelationship between teacher motivation and school goal structures, the present study discovers that a mastery climate increases self-efficacy and job satisfaction and thus decreases emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik, 2017). These findings underline the importance of comprehensive stress management practices in supporting teachers during curriculum transitions, ensuring their effectiveness in the classroom and overall well-being.

3.6 Time Management

The theme identified in this question is taken directly from the research question: "How do you prioritize tasks to deal with the workload and increased time demands?" In this theme, teachers describe various strategies to deal with increased workload and time demands from curriculum changes like those in MATATAG. Teachers reported using time management techniques and employing different strategies to reduce the load by changing curriculum, including those in the MATATAG. These strategies are critical in balancing lesson planning, grading, administrative tasks, and professional development. The creation of effective time management systems will,

therefore, help teachers handle the complexities in their roles and achieve a work-life balance that will be sustainable. Prioritizing tasks allows teachers to focus on high-impact activities that ensure the curriculum goals will be met. In this way, stress and potential burnout are avoided. Efficient time management enhances the teacher's productivity and the general quality of instruction for the benefit of both teachers and students.

T2: *"Schedule important work for most productive times."*

T5: *"Minimize interruption; review workload regularly; task focusing"*

The research noted different time management techniques teachers use to manage their tasks properly. A study by Jerrim and Sims (2020) revealed that effective planning and prioritizing might help to decrease teacher stress and boost productivity. Teachers who tended to break down big tasks into smaller, manageable steps, set deadlines for themselves, and use technology tools to lighten administrative loads coped better with the workload. Teachers who were able to manage their workload effectively reported lower levels of stress and greater job satisfaction. Utilization of collaborative planning and support networks within schools also contributed to more balanced workloads and enhanced productivity.

4.0 Conclusion

The study pointed out some of the significant challenges to implementing the MATATAG Curriculum: a lack of instructional materials, time constraints, diversity in learners' needs, lack of teacher training, ambiguous guidelines, high levels of stress, and teaching innovation. Without clear policies and adequate resources, educators can hardly provide effective instruction, which leads to inconsistent learning outcomes. Such would require more support from the government, better training of teachers, and systematic guidelines in implementing programs, attaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UN SDG) 4 on Quality Education. Another primary concern is the lack of instructional materials, which forces teachers to use out-of-date resources. Reducing non-teaching workloads and curriculum streamlining will save time, allowing teachers to focus on instruction. In addition, the needs of diverse learners must be addressed through differentiated teaching strategies and inclusive education training. Transparent, standardized implementation guidelines are necessary so that curriculum execution is consistent. High levels of teacher stress have implications for teacher well-being and effectiveness, so the promotion of mental health programs, workload management, and peer support systems will be highlighted. Lastly, teaching innovation will be achieved through technology integration to promote research-based strategies that improve student engagement. Systemic support, improvement of policies, and professional development initiatives will empower educators to implement the MATATAG Curriculum more effectively and sustainably toward UN SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The researchers indicate equal contribution to each section.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

We declare no conflict of interest.

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