

Navigating the Engagement, Representation, and Expression in an Inclusive Learning Environment through the Eyes of Public School Teachers

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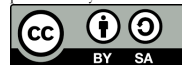
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ABSTRACT

This study looked into how teachers support diverse learners using strategies grounded in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, focusing on three key areas: engagement, representation, and expression. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with fifteen purposively selected teachers from Davao Oriental. Through thematic analysis and triangulation, three main themes emerged, each with sub-themes that reflect how teachers are adapting their practices to meet students' varied needs. While the study found that teachers are deeply committed to inclusive education, many face barriers such as limited training opportunities, lack of assistive technology, and inflexible assessment tools. These findings point to the need for stronger support systems, more resources, and training that is grounded in the realities of local classrooms. The themes identified in this study also offer a foundation for future research, particularly in developing tools for quantitative studies. Researchers may use these insights as variables and indicators in Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to better understand what drives effective inclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education in India holds great promise, but its implementation faces significant challenges. Despite efforts to create an equitable learning environment for all students, various systemic barriers hinder progress. A detailed examination in India revealed that systemic constraints, such as chronic funding shortages and lack of teacher training, meant misalignment with the potential scale of inclusive education (Arias et al., 2023). Similarly, in Australia, underinvestment and structural inflexibility led to high rates of segregated education for students with disabilities (Slee, 2018). These situations highlighted the point that, without strong systemic support, inclusive education was often more of a dream than an achieved reality in many regions. In 2001 alone, 35 million children were out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa and India (DFID, 2005; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

In the Philippines, the shortage impacted how effectively inclusive education was implemented. Teachers, principals, and parents of children with special needs (CSN) mentioned that they feel ill-equipped and lack information and resources to support a diverse learner (Muega, 2016; Cariaga, 2023). Under-resourced and

overcrowded classrooms made it impossible for public schools in the Philippines to meet what quickly became all the learning needs (Ferrerias et al., 2020). Even though the Department of Education made some efforts to promote inclusive education, they were not implemented methodically. For learners with disabilities, being excluded from inclusive educational environments had serious repercussions, limiting their social and intellectual growth, reducing their access to opportunities in the future, and sustaining cycles of inequality. In Davao City, for instance, teachers reported a "very high" level of inclusive practices; studies revealed that these efforts were undermined by a lack of ongoing professional development, classroom resources, and specialized support (Cagas et al., 2023).

There remained a critical need for research on practical, context-specific strategies to bolster inclusive education in the Philippines. Studies by Ainscow and Sandill (2010) emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development, while Mariga et al. (2014) advocated for affordable resources to sustain inclusive practices in low-resource settings. Addressing these gaps in support and resources was essential to creating a more equitable educational landscape (Cariaga et al., 2024). This study sought to investigate practical methods to enhance inclusive education in the Philippines, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on equitable and inclusive education across diverse contexts, including India and other developing nations. This study played a crucial role in advancing inclusive education globally by emphasizing the importance of creating learning environments where every student, including those with disabilities, could thrive. It provided valuable insights to help policymakers formulate more effective policies that ensured equal access to quality education. Beyond influencing policy, it also contributed to a shift in societal mindset, reducing stigma and promoting stronger community support for inclusive practices. Teachers gained practical strategies through the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), enabling them to connect more effectively with diverse learners. At the same time, parents deepened their understanding of inclusive education, which helped strengthen collaboration between home and school. Most importantly, this research underscored how inclusive learning environments improved academic outcomes, fostered social connections, and supported personal growth. Laying the groundwork for future studies contributed to the ongoing effort to make education more accessible and equitable for all, regardless of background or ability.

Statement of the Problem

Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach, the study examined how teachers engaged with diverse learners through the principles of engagement, representation, and expression. The following research questions guided this inquiry: Why must elementary school teachers promote learner engagement in an inclusive learning environment? What do elementary school teachers do to ensure accessibility to navigate different content representations in promoting an inclusive learning environment? How do elementary school teachers implement and adapt multiple forms of expression to promote an inclusive learning environment? Public elementary school teachers in Davao Oriental likely faced significant challenges in implementing inclusive education due to limited training, inadequate classroom resources, and a lack of teaching strategies tailored to diverse learners. These constraints affected their ability to engage students effectively, provide multiple representations of content, and adapt different forms of expression in the learning process. This study was important as it shed light on the real-world difficulties experienced by educators and explored practical solutions to improve inclusive teaching practices. By identifying these challenges and potential interventions, the research aimed to inform better policies, enhance teacher support, and create more inclusive learning environments. The findings also served to guide educational stakeholders in developing strategies that empowered teachers, improved student learning experiences, and strengthened the overall implementation of inclusive education. This study was anchored in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, developed by Dr. Tracey Hall, Dr. David Rose, and Dr. Ann Meyer in the 1980s. UDL served as a foundation for instructional design, organized around three principles grounded in the learning sciences. These principles guided the development of curricula that were effective and inclusive for all learners (Rose & Gravel, 2010). The UDL principles corresponded to three primary brain networks involved in learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002):

1. To support recognition learning, educators provided multiple means of representation, offering flexible ways to present what was taught and learned.
2. To support strategic learning, they provided multiple means of action and expression, offering flexible options for how learners acquired and demonstrated knowledge.

3. To support affective learning, they provided multiple means of engagement, offering flexible options to generate and sustain motivation and addressing the "why" of learning.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, developed by CAST (2024), incorporated three core principles—engagement, representation, and expression—that collectively aimed to create a flexible and inclusive educational environment. As the primary implementers of these principles, teachers played a crucial role in adapting instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners. This study focused on teachers as respondents, recognizing that their insights into the practical application, challenges, and effectiveness of UDL offered essential knowledge for fostering inclusive classrooms. The UDL framework helped establish more inclusive and adaptable learning environments by emphasizing three key principles. Engagement promoted student motivation through choice, collaboration, and self-regulation, empowering learners to take ownership of their education (Meyer et al., 2014; Rose & Meyer, 2006; CAST, 2024). Hence, representation ensured that information was presented in varied formats—such as text, audio, and video—so students with different learning needs could access content in ways that suited them best (Smith & Harvey, 2014; Hehir et al., 2016). More so, expression provided flexibility in assessments, allowing students to demonstrate understanding through different modes while receiving meaningful feedback to support their growth (CAST, 2024; Cariaga, 2024; Rose & Meyer, 2006).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

In this study, I used a descriptive qualitative design to explore the real-world experiences of teachers in inclusive education. This approach allowed me to better understand teachers' strategies without being restricted by predefined theories or assumptions. Descriptive qualitative research is beneficial for capturing firsthand perspectives, focusing on detailed descriptions of experiences rather than numerical data (Smith & Johnson, 2022). I identified key factors influencing engagement, representation, and expression in inclusive classrooms. This method provided a rich, authentic account of their challenges and successes, offering valuable insights that can help improve inclusive teaching practices (Brown & Lee, 2023).

Locale of the Study

I studied in Banaybanay, a coastal municipality located in Davao Oriental, Region XI. Educationally, Banaybanay was home to 14 elementary schools and five secondary schools. Notably, each of these schools provided Special Needs Education programs. By focusing on this locale, this study dives into how public elementary schools implemented inclusive education practices within this context, addressing the specific challenges and opportunities that affected diverse learners in the region (Cagas et al., 2023).

Sample and Sampling Techniques

John W. Creswell (1998) emphasizes that phenomenological research requires a carefully chosen sample size, typically ranging from 5 to 25 participants, to capture meaningful and in-depth insights, ensuring depth and richness of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following a descriptive qualitative design, this study involved 15 special education and receiving teachers from public elementary schools. Using a purposive sampling technique, participants were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. As Palinkas et al. (2015) highlight, this method ensures the inclusion of individuals with direct experience in the topic. Through FGD and purposive sampling, the study provided a rich, detailed account of the realities and strategies for supporting learners with disabilities.

Interview Guide Questions

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide to explore the firsthand experiences of public elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education. The Guide included key questions along with follow-up prompts to uncover the specific challenges teachers faced and the strategies they used to support student engagement, representation, and expression in their classrooms. While a set of core questions was prepared in advance, the flexible format allowed for deeper discussions, ensuring that teachers' unique insights and perspectives were fully captured. To ensure the interview guide was relevant and practical, three experts in Special Needs Education reviewed it. Their feedback was crucial in refining the questions, making them more transparent and more aligned with the study's objectives. Constructive suggestions were carefully considered and integrated, ensuring the Guide effectively facilitated meaningful conversations about inclusive teaching practices.

Data Gathering Technique

After validating the research questionnaires, I ensured that the study underwent a thorough review and received approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) before seeking permission from the Dean of the Graduate School at Holy Cross of Davao College. Once ethical clearance was secured, the study design was presented to a panel of expert examiners for evaluation and endorsement. With the necessary approvals, I obtained an endorsement letter from the Dean of the Graduate School, which was attached to formal request letters submitted to the Schools Division of Davao Oriental, the Public Schools District Supervisor, and the principals of the selected public schools in the Banaybanay District. Upon securing permission, I coordinated with the teacher participants to facilitate their involvement in the study. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted in a confidential setting to document teachers' experiences and strategies in fostering inclusive education. The discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with detailed notes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable, ensuring ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

To thoroughly understand inclusive education practices in Banaybanay District, Davao Oriental, I used a combination of data triangulation and thematic analysis. This approach allowed me to gather diverse perspectives from teachers, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of their experiences and the challenges they faced (Scribbr, 2022). By following the structured process of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), I identified key themes related to engagement, representation, and expression in inclusive education, capturing insights that reflected fundamental classroom dynamics. I reviewed the data multiple times to grasp initial patterns before systematically coding meaningful responses aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, refined to maintain clarity, and validated to ensure they accurately represented the teachers' experiences. The analysis culminated in a final report, presenting each theme with supporting quotes to ensure transparency and offer a nuanced interpretation of teachers' experiences. By comparing responses across different participants, this approach helped uncover both common strategies and district-specific challenges, offering valuable insights that could guide improvements in inclusive education (QDAcity, 2023).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the study's reliability and ethical integrity, I upheld credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was reinforced through member checking and data triangulation, ensuring an accurate representation of teachers' experiences. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used in place of their real names throughout this study. This ensures that their identities remain anonymous and their personal experiences are shared with care and respect. Participant 1- Marideth, Participant 2-Lolita, Participant 3-Diana, Participant 4- Ana, Participant 5- Fe, Participant 6- Sam, Participant 7- Dex, Participant 8- Rose, Participant 9- Jane, Participant 10-She, Participant 11- Xyrel, Participant 12- Linda, Participant 13- Briana, Participant 14- Hannah, Participant 15- Glenda.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Under the engagement, the emerging themes are promoting Equity and Inclusion, Active Learning Strategies, Social Emotional Learning, Student Centered Approach, and Differentiated Instruction. The emerging themes in Representation are Delivering Multimodal Content, using Assistive Technologies and Digital Tools, Differentiating Instructions, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and a Multisensory Teaching Approach. The emerging themes under Expression are Student Choice and Creativity, Scaffolding and Supporting System, Collaborating Learning, Flexible teaching Strategies, and Multimodal Assessment.

Promoting Learner Engagement in an Inclusive Learning Environment

Engagement has five emerging themes, namely, promoting Equity and Inclusion, Active Learning Strategies, Social Emotional Learning, Student Centered Approach, and Differentiated Instruction.

On Promoting Equity and Inclusion

During my time visiting Marideth's inclusive classrooms, I often found myself comparing the experience to watching a garden come to life, with each student growing and thriving in their unique way. She believed deeply

in the importance of recognizing and appreciating each student's individuality. Inclusive education was not simply a teaching strategy; it was a commitment to offering every child, no matter their background or abilities, a fair opportunity to succeed. Engagement played a vital role, acting like sunlight that encouraged even the most uncertain learners to open up and participate, helping to bridge gaps for those facing challenges like disabilities, language differences, or distinct learning styles. In these supportive classrooms, diversity was not something to work around; it was something to celebrate. Students felt valued, noticed, and encouraged to grow into their full potential. By creating a culture built on kindness, understanding, and mutual respect, these teachers turned their classrooms into communities where everyone belonged. Witnessing this reminded me that, at its core, education is about recognizing the worth and humanity in every individual.

"Ang matag bata takus nga makakat-on ug molampos. Pinaagi sa pagpalambo sa ilang pag-apil, masiguro nato nga ang tanan nga estudyante, bisan unsa pa ilang kakayaban, mobati nga bililbo ug kabahin sila sa proseso sa pagkat-on."

"Every child deserves an opportunity to learn and succeed. By promoting engagement, we ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, feel valued and included in the learning process." P1, L 4-6

I was glad to hear Marideth's point of view; however, while it was Lolita's turn, I noticed that she seemed upset and wasn't happy. She spoke in a tense manner. She alleged that some teachers expressed concerns about the challenges of implementing inclusive practices, especially for students with severe disabilities. They described it as trying to sail a ship through a storm without a compass — without proper resources and support, providing individualized engagement strategies felt overwhelming and, at times, impossible to navigate.

"In an inclusive classroom, engagement helps bridge learning gaps and ensures that students with disabilities or language barriers can participate equally." P2, L 7-8

Yet, even in this blooming garden of diverse learners, some teachers quietly shared the weight of their worries. According to Diana, teachers likened the challenge of implementing inclusive practices, especially for students with severe disabilities, to tending a garden in a drought. I agreed with what she said and nodded my head while she spoke in an upset tone. Without enough resources, tools, and hands to help, their efforts to offer personalized support often felt like trying to coax flowers to bloom without sunlight or rain. Despite their dedication, the lack of proper assistance made it challenging to nurture every student the way they deserved.

"Kung apilon nato ang tanan estudyante, makabimo ta og usa ka klase nga nagkalipay sa atong kalabi-an ug naghatag og patas nga bigayon sa matag usa nga molampos."

"When we engage all learners, we foster a classroom culture where differences are celebrated, and every student has a fair chance to succeed." P 3, L 9-10

On Active Learning Strategies

While I agreed with Diana about the frustration of not receiving support, I still felt happy to hear Ana's side. Amidst the struggles of tending this delicate garden, many teachers found creative ways to keep their classrooms alive and thriving. They turned to interactive, hands-on activities — group work, storytelling, games, and real-world applications — as their sunlight and rain, nourishing engagement and breathing life into their lessons. These strategies transformed students from passive vessels waiting to be filled into lively storytellers, problem-solvers, and collaborators, making learning not just a task to complete, but an experience to savor. In doing so, teachers reminded their students, and perhaps even themselves, that growth is always possible, even in the most challenging conditions.

"Engaged students are more likely to retain information and develop a love for learning. Using hands-on activities and group work help maintain their interest." P4, L 12-13

Despite all the creative strategies I saw teachers put into practice, the challenge of engaging every student was like climbing an endless hill. As I interviewed Fe, she noticed that many students thrived in classrooms filled with interactive activities and hands-on learning, but I also noticed that not all of them responded the same way. Some

students, especially those with more complex needs, seemed to have their focus slipping away like water through my fingers, no matter how hard they tried to hold their attention. It became clear to me that reaching each learner was not as simple as following a set plan — it was more like navigating a ship through a storm, constantly adjusting the sails to keep things on course. Teachers had to be flexible, adapting their strategies to fit each student's unique needs, like a tailor stitching a new outfit for every learner. Even though it was a lot of work and often felt overwhelming, I saw that it was a deep, heartfelt commitment to making sure every child had the opportunity to succeed, no matter their pace.

"Incorporating games, storytelling, and real-life examples make learning more interactive and meaningful for students." P5, L 14-15

Inside the classroom, both of us were smiling as Dex shared with me that teachers knew that engagement wasn't just about academic content—it was about creating an environment where students felt emotionally and psychologically safe, like a cocoon where they could slowly unfold into their full potential. I could feel the shift in the room when students were supported, not just with knowledge but with care.

On Social-emotional Learning

When they felt that emotional safety, they didn't just sit back and watch the lesson unfold; they dove in headfirst, eager to share their thoughts, take risks, and explore new ideas. It was as if the classroom became a garden where motivation and confidence could bloom, and each student, nurtured by trust and support, could find the courage to step forward and grow. Without that emotional foundation, academic success was just a house of cards, fragile and easily toppled. But when students felt valued and secure, their participation wasn't just encouraged; it was a natural, vibrant response to the safe space around them.

"Mas makat-on ang mga estudyante kung mobati sila nga luwas ug suportado. Ang ilang pag-apil makatabang sa paghimo og maayong relasyon ug positibo nga kahintang sa klase."

Students learn best when they feel emotionally safe and supported. Engagement helps build relationships and creates a positive classroom environment." P7, L 19-20

The discussion went deeper, and when I interviewed Sheila, I noticed that Sheilah was very serious as she spoke. I nodded in agreement with what she said: Encouraging peer collaboration and discussions also helped students develop self-confidence and created a sense of belonging within the classroom. However, teachers observed that some students hesitated to participate, particularly if they lacked confidence in their abilities.

"Encouraging discussions, peer interactions, and self-expression enhances students' social and emotional well-being." P10, L 26-27

On a Student-Centered Approach

I agreed with what Xyrel was saying, even though she was having a hard time expressing herself. However, she really tried to get her message across that providing students autonomy over their learning was another key strategy for promoting engagement. Teachers noted that when students had control over their learning choices, they became more motivated and invested in their education. Allowing students to explore topics based on their interests, engage in self-directed learning, and take ownership of their progress fostered a sense of responsibility and independence.

"Engagement allows students to take ownership of their learning by making choices and contributing their perspectives." P11, L 28-29

As I enjoyed talking with Xyrel, I saw that there was unity while Linda was speaking. I noticed that some of her colleagues agreed with what she was saying and even shared a bit of their own experiences, too. Despite these benefits, implementing student-centered learning was challenging in classrooms with rigid curriculum structures and large numbers of students. Some teachers struggled to balance student autonomy with the need to meet learning objectives.

"Each child has unique strengths and interests. Engagement helps us tailor instruction to meet their individual needs." P12, L 30-31

On Differentiating Instruction

As Briana spoke, she waved her hands, signaling that she was explaining her experience of differentiation, which ensured that both struggling and excelling students remained actively engaged. Struggling students benefited from scaffolded support, while advanced learners needed challenging tasks to stay motivated. Providing varied learning experiences helped prevent disengagement and promote inclusive education.

"Kinabanglan nato nga labi-labi-on ang pamaagi sa pagkat-on nga baom matag estudyante aron ang matag estudyante — bisan naglisod o maayo na — magpabiling engaged and challenged."

"We need to differentiate learning experiences so that every student, whether struggling or excelling, remains engaged and challenged." P-13, L 33-34

We both smiled when Hannah mentioned that she was using group activities. Grouping students based on their skills, interests, or how they liked to learn made the lessons feel more meaningful and easier to understand. It was like a family meal, where everyone brought something different to the table, and together, it made everything better. Mixed groups helped students learn from one another, while those who needed more help were quietly given the support they needed to catch up at their own pace. In the end, it made sure no one was left behind, and everyone had a fair chance to grow and be part of the classroom's shared success.

"Using flexible groupings and individualized support ensures that engagement is meaningful for every learner." P-14, L 35-36

Glenda expertly commented that different students learned in different ways. Incorporating visuals, discussions, hands-on activities, and written materials made learning more engaging and accessible. By varying instructional strategies, teachers increased participation and accommodated diverse learning styles.

"When we vary our teaching methods, we cater to different learning styles and increase student participation." P-15, L 37-38

Ensuring Accessibility Through Different Representations of Content

The representation has five emerging themes: delivering Multimodal Content, using Assistive Technologies and Digital Tools, Differentiating Instructions, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and a Multisensory Teaching Approach.

On Delivering Multimodal Content

While I was interviewing them, I noticed that they were enjoying themselves and were excited to answer. As Briana spoke, she recognized that students learned through different sensory modalities and emphasized the need to present content in ways that catered to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. Teachers ensured that students received information in formats that best suited their needs by integrating videos, hands-on activities, music, real-world examples, and interactive learning experiences.

"Nagpresentar ko og impormasyon sa nagkalain-laing pamaagi — sama sa mga video, dula nga interactive, mga buhaton, ug sinulat nga teksto — aron matubag ang lain-laing pamaagi sa pagkat-on sa mga estudyante."

"I present information in multiple formats—videos, interactive games, hands-on activities, and written texts—to cater to different learning preferences." P13, L 71-72

I liked Hannah's statement that using visual aids such as charts and diagrams, incorporating listening activities, and providing opportunities for movement-based learning enhanced student comprehension and retention. These strategies were particularly beneficial for students with processing difficulties or attention-related challenges.

"Using visual aids, mind maps, and diagrams supports students who process information better through images." P14, L 73-74

On Assistive Technologies and Digital Tools

To further enhance accessibility, Fe integrated assistive technologies such as text-to-speech software, audiobooks, and screen readers to support students with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments, dyslexia, or other reading difficulties.

"For students with disabilities, I provide text-to-speech tools and closed captions to support content comprehension." P5, L 52-53

As Sam answered, I could see how proud she was of herself. In her eyes, I saw the spark of dedication shining through with every word she spoke. Teachers also incorporated interactive digital platforms and adaptive learning applications, allowing students to navigate content independently. However, access to such technologies was inconsistent across all schools, with some teachers reporting insufficient resources and budget constraints.

"I integrate adaptive learning apps that allow students to engage with content at their own pace." P6, L 54-55

On Differentiating Instruction

As I talked to Rose, we were both in agreement that to ensure accessibility for all learners, teachers modified lesson content, activities, and assessments to fit each student's abilities. This approach allowed students to engage with content in a way that aligned with their strengths and needs.

"Providing graphic organizers, step-by-step guides, and scaffolded notes ensures that all students can navigate complex content." P8, L 59-60

We both smiled in agreement with Jane's practice of employing tiered assignments and flexible instructional methods, ensuring students at different levels could still participate and understand key concepts. However, this process required additional planning time and effort, making it difficult for teachers to apply consistently in large classrooms.

"Pinaagi sa paggamit ng tiered assignments, makatrabaho ang mga estudyante sa parehas nga konsepto pero sa lain-lain lebel sa kalisod."

"Using tiered assignments allows students to work on the same concepts at different levels of difficulty." P9, L 61-62

On Culturally Responsive Teaching

Sheilah spoke seriously, and I listened to her carefully. Teachers emphasized the importance of reflecting diverse cultures and backgrounds in their materials to make learning more relatable and inclusive. By incorporating stories, historical perspectives, and examples from different cultural contexts, they ensured that students from various backgrounds felt represented.

"I incorporate stories, examples, and resources from different cultures so that all students feel represented in the curriculum." P10, L 64-65

Brianna noted that presenting information in multiple formats—such as interactive activities, videos, and real-world applications—enhanced student understanding. However, developing multimodal content required additional preparation time, and some educators struggled with time constraints and limited access to diverse learning materials.

"I present information in multiple formats—videos, interactive games, hands-on activities, and written texts—to cater to different learning preferences." P13, L 71-72

On the Multisensory Teaching Approach

Diana, as a teacher, expressed that she struggled to implement accessibility tools due to budget constraints and a lack of specialized resources. Schools with limited funding may not have had screen readers, speech-to-text software, or specialized instructional materials, making it difficult to accommodate students with disabilities fully.

"Many students who require specialized tools, such as speech-to-text software or adaptive learning devices, do not have access to them due to budget constraints." P3, L 47-48

Implementing and Adapting Multiple Forms of Expression

The expression has five emerging themes: Student Choice and Creativity, Scaffolding and Supporting System, Collaborative Learning, Flexible teaching Strategies, and Multimodal Assessment.

On Multimodal Assessments

As I listened to Marideth, I saw the happiness she felt as she remembered the activities she had with her students. She was smiling happily, knowing that students expressed their understanding differently and emphasized the importance of varied assessment methods. Instead of relying solely on traditional tests, educators used written assignments, oral presentations, creative projects, and hands-on demonstrations to provide students with opportunities to showcase their knowledge in ways that suited their abilities.

"Ginatugotan nako ang mga estudyante nga ipakita ang ilang pagsabot pinaagi sa pagsulat, pagdrowing, pasalitang presentasyon, ug mga malikbain nga proyekto."

"I allow students to express their understanding through writing, drawing, oral presentations, and creative projects." P1, L 81-82

By the looks of Lolita as she spoke, she was a bit strict when it came to activities and portfolios. She said in a serious tone that incorporating visual, verbal, and practical assessment methods, teachers ensured that students with different learning styles and abilities had fair and meaningful opportunities to demonstrate their comprehension. However, developing multiple assessment formats required extra time and effort, making it challenging for teachers to implement consistently in large classrooms.

"Some students may struggle with traditional tests, so I provide alternative assessments like portfolios, concept maps, or video explanations." P2, L 83-84

On Flexible Teaching Strategies

I saw dedication in Ana's statement, as she said that she adjusted her methods to align them with her students' needs. Teachers adapted their instructional methods based on students' strengths and individual learning preferences. They used differentiated instruction, hands-on activities, and customized lesson plans to ensure that students could express themselves in ways that felt natural to them.

"I adjust my teaching methods to align with students' strengths, whether they learn best through speaking, writing, movement, or visuals." P4, L 88-89

Fe also said that flexibility in teaching was significant for students with learning disabilities or language barriers, as it allowed them to engage with content in ways that matched their skills. Teachers emphasized that providing various means of communication and self-expression helped students develop confidence and improve their learning outcomes.

"Pinaagi sa paghatag og daghang paagi para ipakita sa mga estudyante ang ilang kaugalingon, masiguro nga matag usa makabaton og higayon nga molampos."

"Offering students multiple ways to express themselves ensures that everyone has an opportunity to succeed." P5, L 90-91

On Collaborating Learning

I saw that everyone nodded their head, agreeing with what Dex was saying. Encouraging peer collaboration and teamwork was another key strategy that supported student expression. Teachers incorporated group discussions, partner activities, and cooperative projects, allowing students to exchange ideas, learn from their peers, and develop communication skills.

"Pairing students for peer discussions and group projects helps them learn from one another and practice different forms of expression." P7, L 95-96

I saw in their eyes, especially Jane, that they agreed with what she said: they are really trying their best and going the extra mile to use a different approach. Using a different approach was particularly effective in boosting student confidence, as working in teams provided a supportive environment where students felt comfortable sharing their ideas. However, some students initially hesitated to participate in group activities, requiring additional encouragement and structured support.

"Allowing students to collaborate on multimedia projects gives them a platform to express themselves in diverse ways." P9, L 99-100

Sheilah emphasized the importance of structured guidance and step-by-step instructions to help students develop their ability to express ideas effectively. By breaking tasks into smaller steps, providing sentence starters, and using visual aids, educators gradually built students' confidence and independence in communication.

"I provide sentence starters, graphic organizers, and templates to help students structure their responses." P10, L 102-103

On Scaffolding and Supporting System

Xyrel was happy using this approach. She expressed that it was particularly beneficial for students with special learning needs, as it ensured that they received the necessary support before transitioning to independent work. Teachers also highlighted the role of modeling different forms of expression, helping students become familiar with new communication methods.

"By modeling different forms of expression, I help students gain confidence in using varied communication methods." P11, L 104-105

On Student Choice and Creativity

I saw creativity in Hannah's eyes as she encouraged students to express their ideas through mediums like storytelling, visual presentations, and technology-based projects. However, allowing full student autonomy was difficult within structured curriculum requirements, and some students required additional guidance in choosing the best mode of expression.

"Providing creative outlets like storytelling, art, and technology-based presentations makes learning more engaging and personalized." P14, L 111-11

Promoting Learner Engagement in an Inclusive Learning Environment

On Promoting Equity and Inclusion in the Classroom

The promotion of equity and inclusive classrooms, as a thought that I encountered in this study, is that it is important to recognize and appreciate each student's individuality. Inclusive education was not simply a teaching strategy; it was a commitment to offering every child, no matter their background or abilities, a fair opportunity to succeed. This idea affirms the impression, according to Ainscow, M. (2020), where promoting equity and inclusion in the classroom was an opportunity to revive the broadened notion of inclusion as a general guiding principle to strengthen equal access to quality learning opportunities for all learners. Singh (2024) also discusses how inclusive education serves as a transformative approach that prioritizes the rights and needs of all students, including those with disabilities. The study underscores that inclusive practices foster a supportive learning environment where every student feels valued and respected, thereby promoting engagement, which also supports the idea of this study.

On Active Learning Strategies

Active Learning strategies, as I learned in this study, teachers turned to interactive, hands-on activities, group work, storytelling, games, and real-world applications as their sunlight and rain, nourishing engagement and breathing life into their lessons. This idea aligns with what Gosavi, C. S., & Arora, S. (2022) claimed that implementation of various active learning strategies, including case studies, role play, flipped classrooms, and

quizzes, in computer science courses. Their study found that these strategies significantly improved students' academic performance, skill development, and overall satisfaction. Statistical analyses, such as chi-squared tests, validated the effectiveness of these methods in enhancing student engagement. Their claims highly support this study.

On Social-emotional Learning

I found out that *Social-emotional Learning* encouraged peer collaboration and discussions, which also helped students develop self-confidence and created a sense of belonging within the classroom. This idea aligns with Morton & Pilgrim (2023), who discussed how integrating SEL with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles can address the diverse academic, social, and emotional needs of students. By focusing on resilience and executive function skills, this combined approach supports intentional lesson design that accommodates learner variability, promoting inclusivity and engagement. In addition, Brown also supports the idea of SEL, which emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach involving teachers, administrators, and policymakers to create a supportive educational environment where Social Emotional Learning can thrive. The study concludes that collaborative efforts are essential for fostering emotional intelligence and engagement among students in inclusive settings (Brown, 2022). Brown, Morton, and Pilgrim highly support this study.

On a Student-Centered Approach

As I dig deeper into my study, I noted that when students had control over their learning choices, they became more motivated and invested in their education. Allowing students to explore topics based on their interests, engage in self-directed learning, and take ownership of their progress fostered a sense of responsibility and independence. This idea is supported by Carillo (2024), where he conducted a qualitative study involving ten public elementary school teachers in Mati, Davao Oriental, Philippines, to explore engagement strategies in student-centered classrooms. The findings revealed that teachers employed differentiated instruction, reward systems, and active learning strategies to address diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds. These approaches enhanced student engagement and motivation, underscoring the effectiveness of student-centered methods in creating inclusive learning environments, which strongly supports this study. Also, in Catubig's qualitative case study, he examined the implementation of student-centered approaches in mathematics education within diverse educational settings. The study found that such approaches enhanced student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and ownership of learning. Educators employed strategies like curriculum adaptation, collaborative learning, and scaffolded instruction to address challenges such as time constraints and assessment alignment, demonstrating the transformative potential of student-centered methods in inclusive classrooms (Catubig, 2023). This claim supports this study.

On Differentiating Instruction

In this study, I noted that using group activities or grouping students based on their skills, interests, or how they liked to learn made the lessons feel more meaningful and easier to understand. This aligned with the study, *Differentiated Instruction as an Approach to Establish Effective Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms* by Gheysens et al. (2023), who explored how Differentiated Instruction can be utilized to create effective teaching strategies in inclusive classrooms. The authors developed the DI-Quest model to conceptualize and implement DI, emphasizing its role in addressing individual learning needs and maximizing learning opportunities. This supports the idea of this study.

Ensuring Accessibility Through Different Representations of Content

On Delivering Multimodal Content

In the study, students learned through different sensory modalities and emphasized the need to present content in ways that catered to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. This affirms the study *Teaching Visual Accessibility in Introductory Data Science Classes with Multimodal Data Representations*, authored by Seo, J., & Dogucu, M. (2022), who argued that relying solely on visualizations in data science education can create barriers for students who are blind or visually impaired. They advocate for incorporating multiple data representation methods, such as tactile graphics and auditory descriptions, to make data science more accessible. The authors emphasize that teaching accessibility should begin in introductory courses to instill inclusive practices early in students' academic journeys. This study also gives a foundation that supports the idea of delivering multimodal content.

On Assistive Technologies and Digital Tools

As I learned in this study, teachers also incorporated interactive digital platforms and adaptive learning applications, allowing students to navigate content independently. This affirms Togni (2025), who developed an inclusive educational platform integrating machine learning and open technologies to enhance accessibility for students with special needs. The platform features speech recognition, real-time object recognition, and text-to-speech systems, demonstrating high usability and positive impacts in educational settings. Also, Seo and Dogucu advocate for incorporating multiple data representation methods, such as tactile graphics and auditory descriptions, in data science education to enhance accessibility for students who are blind or visually impaired. They emphasize the importance of teaching accessibility in introductory courses to instill inclusive practices early (Seo & Dogucu, 2022). Both studies support the idea of Assistive Technologies and Digital Tools to ensure accessibility through different representations of content.

On Differentiating Instruction

As I dig deeper into this study, I learned that to ensure accessibility for all learners, teachers modified lesson content, activities, and assessments to fit each student's individual abilities. This approach allowed students to engage with content in a way that aligned with their strengths and needs. This affirms the study of Gheysens et al. (2023), which discusses the Differentiating Instruction-Quest model, which provides a framework for implementing Differentiated Instruction in inclusive classrooms. They emphasize that Differentiated Instruction, through varied instructional strategies and content representations, can address individual learning needs and promote equitable access to education. In addition, Lawrence-Brown explores how differentiated instruction serves as a foundational approach to inclusive education. By tailoring instruction to meet diverse learners' needs, including those with disabilities and giftedness, Differentiated Instruction ensures that content is accessible through multiple representations and modalities (Lawrence-Brown, 2020). These authors support the idea of this study.

On Culturally Responsive Teaching

As I learned in this study, teachers emphasized the importance of reflecting diverse cultures and backgrounds in their materials to make learning more relatable and inclusive. By incorporating stories, historical perspectives, and examples from different cultural contexts, they ensured that students from various backgrounds felt represented. This affirmation of Chu's study explores the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices in inclusive preschool settings in Taiwan. The research highlights that professional support and collective teaching efficacy are key factors in effectively integrating CRT, which includes adapting curriculum and instruction to reflect students' cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing accessibility (Chu, 2021). This also affirms Kuwari(2024), who explored effective strategies for implementing CRT to promote inclusivity and diversity. The article emphasizes understanding students' cultural contexts, employing diverse instructional materials, facilitating open dialogue, and encouraging community and family involvement to ensure accessibility through different content representations. Both Chu and Kawari strongly support the study on culturally responsive teaching, which ensures accessibility through different representations of content.

On the Multisensory Teaching Approach

I learned that teachers implement accessibility tools like screen readers, speech-to-text software, or specialized instructional materials that fully accommodate students with disabilities. This idea affirmed the authors Doore et al. (2023) who developed a multisensory diagrammatic system (MDS) combining visual, auditory, and haptic feedback to make STEM diagrams accessible to both sighted and visually impaired learners. Their study found no significant differences in learning outcomes between traditional and multisensory formats, supporting the effectiveness of multisensory teaching through multimodal content delivery. Also, Varano and Zanella (2023) studied the "Sense the Universe" exhibit, which uses visual, auditory, and haptic stimuli to represent astronomical data. The authors argue that multisensory representations enhance understanding and retention of scientific concepts, making them accessible to both sighted and visually impaired individuals. The study, A Comprehensive Review: Effectiveness of Multisensory Learning Strategies for Learning Disability Students, highlights the benefits of multisensory learning strategies for students with learning disabilities. The authors emphasize that engaging multiple senses can improve academic performance and provide a more inclusive educational

experience (Gulati et al., 2024). These studies support the idea of the Multisensory Teaching Approach to ensure accessibility through different representations of content.

Implementing and Adapting Multiple Forms of Expression

On Multimodal Assessments

Multimodal Assessment, as I learned in this study, expressed understanding differently and emphasized the importance of varied assessment methods. Instead of relying solely on traditional tests, educators used written assignments, oral presentations, creative projects, and hands-on demonstrations to provide students with opportunities to showcase their knowledge in ways that suited their abilities. This idea affirms the study of Kohnke et. al (2022), which investigates the role of multimodal formative assessments delivered through Learning Management Systems (LMS) in supporting English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students. Findings suggest that such assessments predict final course performance and enhance learning by providing diverse modes of engagement. This also affirms Liu et al. (2020) present a model for generating personalized feedback on student assignments that includes multimodal inputs such as images, audio, and text. Their approach aims to enhance accessibility by providing tailored feedback that addresses the various modes of student expression. These studies support the idea of Multimodal Assessments in implementing and adapting multiple forms of expression.

On Flexible Teaching Strategies

Flexible Teaching Strategies, as I learned in this study, are adjusting methods in order to align them to students' needs. Teachers adapted their instructional methods based on students' strengths and individual learning preferences. They used differentiated instruction, hands-on activities, and customized lesson plans to ensure that students could express themselves in ways that felt natural to them. This idea affirms de Bie and Brown (2023), who provide educators with strategies to implement flexible teaching practices that promote accessibility and inclusion. De Bie and Brown emphasize the importance of adapting instructional methods to support diverse learners, advocating for the use of multiple forms of expression to accommodate different learning styles and needs. Gelir explores how preschool teachers' beliefs influence their adoption of flexible language strategies to support children's language development. The study highlights that teachers who embrace flexibility in their instructional approaches can better cater to the diverse linguistic needs of students, facilitating multiple forms of expression and enhancing learning outcomes (Gelir, 2023). These studies support flexible teaching strategies for implementing and adapting multiple forms of expression.

On Collaborating Learning

Collaborating Learning, as I learned in this study, is encouraging peer collaboration and teamwork, a key strategy that supports student expression. Teachers incorporated group discussions, partner activities, and cooperative projects, allowing students to exchange ideas, learn from their peers, and develop communication skills. This idea highly affirms Jiang et al.(2022), who examined how English teachers incorporated digital multimodal composing (DMC) into their curriculum through collaborative action research. They found that while DMC presents challenges, such as increased workload and the need for digital literacy, it also offers opportunities for students to express their understanding through various modes, enhancing engagement and learning outcomes. Also, Yan et al. (2024) explored the use of multimodal learning analytics to provide feedback and support reflection in collaborative learning settings. By analyzing data such as speech, gestures, and facial expressions, they demonstrated that multimodal analytics can enhance understanding of group dynamics and support the development of collaborative skills. These studies support the study on collaborative learning in implementing and adapting multiple forms of expression.

On Scaffolding and Supporting System

Scaffolding and Supporting System, as I learned in this study, ensured students received the necessary support before transitioning to independent work. Teachers also highlighted the role of modeling different forms of expression, helping students gain familiarity with new communication methods. This idea affirms the study of Doo et al. (2023) developed meta-analysis which investigates the impact of various scaffolding strategies in online learning environments. The authors conclude that scaffolding significantly enhances learning outcomes by supporting diverse forms of expression and engagement, emphasizing the importance of well-designed support systems in digital education. Vasinda examines the role of technology-based scaffolds within the Universal Design for Learning (UDI) framework. The study discusses how digital tools can serve as scaffolds to support multiple

means of expression, questioning whether these supports are temporary aids or integral components of modern literacy practices (Vasinda, 2023). These studies support the study on scaffolding and supporting systems in implementing and adapting multiple forms of expression.

On Student Choice and Creativity

I learned that *Student Choice and Creativity* encouraged students to express their ideas through mediums like storytelling, visual presentations, and technology-based projects. This highly affirms Allagui (2022), who explores students' experiences with multimodal writing, where they had the freedom to choose their modes of expression. While students found multimodal writing more engaging than traditional essays, many defaulted to familiar formats like PowerPoint, often due to a desire to showcase writing skills and uncertainty about using diverse semiotic resources. The author suggests that explicit instruction on various modes can enhance students' creative expression. Also, the idea of Ruiz-Pérez examines how digital storytelling projects in a foreign language curriculum can amplify student voice and creativity. By allowing students to make design choices and express themselves through various modes, the study found that students could better represent their perspectives and engage more deeply with the content (Ruiz-Pérez, 2023). These studies support the study on Student Choice and Creativity in implementing and adapting multiple forms of expression.

Addressing Systemic Challenges in Inclusive Education

Beyond classroom-level strategies, the study revealed systemic barriers that hindered the successful implementation of inclusive education. Teachers frequently mentioned limited professional development opportunities, inadequate funding, and policy gaps. These findings echoed the work of Mariga et al. (2024), who stressed that sustainable, inclusive education requires a multi-stakeholder approach, including government agencies, educators, and community organizations. Moreover, political favoritism in educational resource distribution was identified as challenging the securing of funding for special education programs. This was consistent with findings from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA, 2024), which reported disparities in budget allocations for inclusive education initiatives. Addressing this requires transparent funding mechanisms and policy advocacy to ensure equitable resource access.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provided a closer look at how Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is being applied in inclusive classrooms in Davao Oriental. It became clear that while teachers are genuinely committed to making education inclusive for all, they face real challenges—limited training, a lack of assistive tools, and not enough flexibility in how they assess student learning. These obstacles make it difficult to fully bring UDL principles—engagement, representation, and expression—to life in their teaching.

What also stood out is that UDL isn't just a method for planning lessons—it's a bigger framework that can help shape school culture, teacher development, and even education policies. But for this to happen, there needs to be strong collaboration among everyone involved—teachers, school heads, parents, and the wider community. By taking these steps, we can move closer to an education system where every learner feels seen, supported, and capable of success. UDL offers a hopeful path forward—but to make it real, we must match that hope with action, resources, and shared commitment.

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