



JOURNAL

OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH,
INNOVATION, AND
MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

An Academic Journal Publication



Website: | <https://jerimspublication.com>

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBERS



PRINT ISSN

3116-5559



ONLINE ISSN

3116-5567

Volume 1, Issue 6, pp 18-23, August 2026

Research Article

Thinking Behind Teaching: Instructional Decision-Making of Grade 3 Teachers

Cindy F. Babiera & Denmark S. Macalisang

Department of Education

Article History:

Submission: July, 2026

Revised: July, 2026

Accepted: August, 2026

Published: August, 2026

Originality: 95%

Similarity Index: 4%

Grammarly Score: 97%

*Corresponding Author:

cindy.babiera@deped.gov.ph

Recommended Citation:

Babiera, C & Macalisang, D., (2026). Thinking Behind Teaching: Instructional Decision-Making of Grade 3 Teachers. *Journal of Educational Research, Innovation, and Multidisciplinary Studies*, 1(6), 18-23.

<https://doi.org/10.67001/jeri.2026.06.Y5T1QN>

ABSTRACT

This study examined the instructional decision-making of Grade 3 teachers in classrooms with diverse learner readiness levels in District 3, Oroquieta City Division during the School Year 2025–2026. Using a qualitative phenomenological–thematic design, the study explored teachers’ lived experiences, challenges encountered, and instructional strategies employed in addressing learner variability. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that teachers faced complexities in managing diverse learners, limited time, and insufficient instructional resources. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated adaptability through differentiated instruction, scaffolding, collaborative learning, and assessment-driven practices. The study highlights the importance of providing adequate support systems, professional development, and context-responsive instructional policies to enhance teachers’ capacity to respond effectively to learner diversity. The findings contribute to improving instructional practices and promoting inclusive education in early-grade classrooms.

Keywords: *assessment-driven instruction, differentiated instruction, instructional decision-making, learner readiness, phenomenological study*

Copyright Notice:

2026 Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Introduction

Instructional decision-making for learners with diverse readiness and proficiency levels refers to the process by which teachers intentionally plan, adjust, and implement instructional strategies based on learners' varying skills, prior knowledge, and pace of learning. Internationally, this concept is strongly associated with differentiated instruction and formative assessment, which emphasize responsiveness to learner diversity within the classroom. According to Tomlinson (2021), effective teachers continuously make instructional decisions by aligning content, process, and assessment to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Recent studies further highlight that instructional decision-making is not a one-time planning activity but a dynamic, evidence-based process that occurs before, during, and after instruction, particularly in heterogeneous classrooms (Heritage, 2020; Schildkamp et al., 2021).

In the Philippine basic education context, learner variability is a persistent reality, particularly in the early grades where foundational literacy and numeracy skills are developed. The Department of Education (DepEd) formally recognizes this through several policy issuances. DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2019 (Policy Guidelines on the K to 12 Basic Education Program) emphasizes learner-centered instruction that responds to learners' developmental needs and individual differences. Furthermore, DepEd Order No. 31, s. 2020 (Interim Guidelines for Assessment and Grading) underscores the use of formative assessment to guide instructional adjustments based on learners' actual performance. More recently, DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2023 (National Learning Recovery Program – NLRP) directs schools to implement targeted interventions in reading and numeracy based on learners' current proficiency levels. These policies collectively reinforce the expectation that teachers must make responsive instructional decisions grounded in classroom evidence.

Within the Oroquieta City Division, particularly in District 3, schools similarly face the challenge of addressing diverse levels of reading proficiency among Grade 3 learners. Local school monitoring reports and Learning Action Cell (LAC) discussions indicate that some learners demonstrate mastery of grade-level competencies, while others require additional support in decoding, fluency, and comprehension. These classroom realities reflect national concerns. The World Bank (2022) reported that many Filipino learners experience learning poverty, meaning they struggle to read and understand age-appropriate texts by around age 10. Supporting this, EDCOM II (2023) disclosed that a significant proportion of Filipino learners are not reading at the expected level by the end of Grade 3. While these large-scale assessments quantify learning gaps, there remains limited qualitative research at the district level that explores how Grade 3 teachers in District 3, Oroquieta City Division, experience and navigate instructional decision-making in response to diverse learner readiness.

Scholars argue that instructional decisions are most effective when grounded in classroom-based evidence rather than rigid curricular pacing. Heritage (2020) explains that formative assessment becomes meaningful only when teachers interpret assessment information and translate it into immediate instructional actions such as reteaching, scaffolding, or enrichment. Similarly, Schildkamp et al. (2021) emphasize that data-based decision-making involves not only accessing learner data but also understanding how teachers interpret and act on this information within contextual constraints such as class size and time allocation. These perspectives align with DepEd's push for evidence-based instructional practices under the National Learning Recovery Program.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of Grade 3 teachers in making instructional decisions for learners with diverse readiness levels in District 3, Oroquieta City Division. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how teachers identify differences in learner proficiency, what instructional strategies they employ to address these differences, and what contextual factors influence their decisions in actual classroom settings. By focusing on teachers' experiences, the study intends to generate localized insights that may inform school-based interventions, Learning Action Cell (LAC) initiatives, and instructional leadership practices consistent with DepEd's learning recovery policies. The expected outcome of this study is a deeper understanding of the realities Grade 3 teachers face when teaching learners with varying levels of proficiency, including the challenges, adaptive strategies, and decision-making processes they employ. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based recommendations that may support teachers, school heads, and division leaders in strengthening instructional responsiveness.

Methods

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Grade 3 teachers in making instructional decisions for learners with uneven readiness levels, recognizing that differences in academic readiness, learning pace, language background, and access to learning support create significant challenges in mixed-ability classrooms. The study involved ten Grade 3 teachers selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience in handling heterogeneous classrooms, lesson planning, assessment, and instructional decision-making. Data were gathered using a researcher-modified semi-structured interview guide and were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to teachers' experiences, challenges, and instructional strategies. The study highlights how teachers respond to differences in learner readiness by adjusting lesson pacing, instructional strategies, assessment practices, and individualized or small-group support while dealing with constraints such as class size, limited instructional resources, time, and curriculum demands. These insights emphasize the importance of teacher professional judgment, differentiated instruction, assessment-informed decision-making, and appropriate school support in addressing learner diversity and improving instructional practices in early-grade classrooms.

Results and Discussions

Theme 1: Diversity of Learner Readiness and Instructional Complexity

The first theme, Diversity of Learner Readiness and Instructional Complexity, reveals that Grade 3 teachers experience considerable difficulty in making instructional decisions because learners enter the classroom with different levels of knowledge, skills, comprehension, and learning pace. The participants consistently observed that some learners can immediately understand instructions, complete activities independently, and progress to more difficult tasks, while others require repeated explanations, additional time, and close teacher assistance. One teacher explained that some pupils can already read while others are still developing this basic skill, requiring the teacher to prepare activities that can accommodate both groups. Other participants similarly described situations in which some learners complete their work quickly while others remain confused or have difficulty following instructions. These experiences demonstrate that learner readiness is not simply a difference in academic performance; rather, it directly shapes teachers' decisions about lesson pacing, activity selection, grouping, questioning, and the amount of assistance provided to individual learners. The teachers therefore have to continuously observe their pupils and make adjustments while instruction is taking place. This makes teaching in a mixed-readiness classroom a dynamic process in which a single approach cannot always respond effectively to the needs of every learner.

The findings further suggest that the complexity created by learner diversity is most visible when teachers attempt to balance the needs of advanced and struggling learners simultaneously. Participants reported that differences in comprehension and task completion often force them to divide their attention between learners who are ready to move forward and those who still need guidance. For example, teachers described simplifying lessons, breaking difficult tasks into smaller steps, and providing more time and assistance to pupils who could not immediately follow the lesson. At the same time, they must ensure that learners who finish early remain meaningfully engaged. This situation creates an instructional tension because slowing the lesson excessively may limit opportunities for advanced learners, while moving too quickly may cause struggling learners to fall further behind. Consequently, equitable teaching does not necessarily mean giving every learner exactly the same activity, time, or level of support. Rather, the participants' experiences indicate that teachers interpret equity as providing the type and amount of assistance needed for learners to participate meaningfully and progress from their present level of readiness. The participants nevertheless acknowledged that providing such individualized attention becomes difficult when many learners require different forms of assistance at the same time.

These findings support the broader principle that effective instruction in diverse classrooms requires flexibility and responsiveness rather than a uniform approach to teaching. Tomlinson (2021) explains that differentiated instruction responds to differences in learners' readiness by adjusting instructional experiences according to their needs, while the OECD (2020) recognizes managing diverse learner needs as one of the continuing complexities of teachers' work. UNESCO (2021) likewise emphasizes that inclusive education requires instructional practices that recognize differences in ability, participation, comprehension, and learning pace. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) further argue that responsive teaching is important in creating equitable learning

opportunities because teachers must use their professional judgment to determine what forms of support are appropriate for particular learners. The present findings reinforce these perspectives by showing that differentiation is not merely an instructional technique prepared before a lesson; it is also an ongoing decision-making process occurring throughout classroom instruction. Teachers constantly interpret learner responses, determine whether to proceed or reteach, decide who requires additional assistance, and modify activities according to emerging needs. Thus, learner diversity increases instructional complexity, but it also highlights the central role of teachers' professional judgment in ensuring that instruction remains responsive and inclusive.

Theme 2: Contextual Constraints Affecting Responsive Instruction

The second theme concerns the Contextual Constraints Affecting Responsive Instruction, particularly limited instructional time, large class sizes, curriculum pressure, inadequate learning resources, and insufficient professional and institutional support. Although teachers recognize the importance of differentiated and individualized instruction, the findings indicate that classroom realities frequently limit their ability to implement these practices consistently. Participants described difficulty giving sufficient attention to individual learners because several pupils may require assistance simultaneously. Large classes further complicate the situation because teachers must monitor learner performance, maintain classroom order, provide feedback, and accomplish required lessons within a limited instructional period. The challenge therefore extends beyond teachers' willingness or knowledge of differentiation. Even when teachers understand what their learners need, they may lack sufficient time, materials, or opportunities to provide the desired level of support. The findings consequently demonstrate that instructional decision-making occurs within practical conditions that can either support or restrict teachers' ability to respond to learner diversity.

Curriculum demands create another important tension in teachers' instructional decision-making. Participants reported feeling pressure to complete prescribed lessons even when some learners had not yet achieved sufficient understanding to move forward. One participant explained that finishing the curriculum on time makes it more difficult to adjust instruction for struggling learners, while another described feeling pressure to continue lessons despite some pupils not being ready. A third participant identified balancing curriculum requirements and learners' actual needs as one of the most difficult responsibilities of teaching. These accounts reveal a conflict between curriculum coverage and learner mastery. Teachers are expected to accomplish prescribed competencies within an established period, yet learner-centered teaching requires them to respond to the actual pace and needs of pupils. When these expectations compete, teachers must decide whether to proceed, reteach, simplify, provide remediation, or modify subsequent activities. Such decisions become particularly difficult when several learners require additional support. The findings therefore suggest that effective differentiated instruction depends not only on teacher competence but also on sufficient instructional flexibility, realistic pacing, and school structures that allow teachers to respond to evidence of learner understanding rather than focusing solely on completing required content.

The participants' experiences are consistent with literature showing that structural and institutional conditions influence the quality of inclusive instruction. OECD (2020) identifies time constraints and large classes as factors that can restrict teachers' ability to provide individualized support, while UNESCO (2021) recognizes insufficient resources and overcrowded classrooms as barriers to inclusive education. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) similarly emphasize that responsive and differentiated instruction requires supportive working conditions, appropriate resources, and opportunities for professional learning. The findings of the present study also reveal that teachers themselves recognize the importance of additional training, instructional materials, and administrative support. Participants specifically expressed the need for more teaching resources, reading materials, professional training, and assistance in developing strategies for learners with different abilities. This implies that improving instruction for diverse learners should not place responsibility exclusively on individual teachers. School leaders and educational systems must also create enabling conditions by strengthening instructional support, providing relevant materials, offering continuous professional development, and giving teachers opportunities to collaboratively address learner difficulties. In this sense, learner diversity becomes not only a classroom concern but also an organizational responsibility requiring coordinated support from teachers, school leaders, and the wider educational system.

Theme 3: Adaptive, Differentiated, and Assessment-Guided Instruction

The third theme, Adaptive, Differentiated, and Assessment-Guided Instruction, reflects how teachers actively

respond to learner diversity through multiple instructional strategies rather than relying on one method for the entire class. The findings identify collaborative learning, peer tutoring, heterogeneous grouping, guided reading, phonics instruction, remediation, differentiated tasks, scaffolding, visual materials, and assessment-guided adjustments as important practices used by the participants. Collaborative learning emerged as an especially useful strategy because it allows learners with different readiness levels to support one another. Teachers reported intentionally grouping pupils with different abilities so that learners who understand a lesson can assist classmates who are still struggling. One participant specifically described peer tutoring as effective because pupils learn from one another, while other accounts indicate that heterogeneous grouping encourages participation and shared responsibility for learning. These practices suggest that teachers do not view learner differences solely as problems that must be individually managed. Instead, differences can become instructional resources when classroom activities are structured so that learners interact, explain ideas, and provide appropriate peer support.

Adaptive instruction is also evident in teachers' use of scaffolding, simplified explanations, visual aids, and targeted interventions. Rather than expecting struggling learners to immediately perform the same tasks independently, teachers break lessons into manageable parts, provide step-by-step guidance, repeat important concepts, and use pictures, diagrams, and concrete examples to strengthen understanding. The use of guided reading, phonics, remediation, and additional exercises further demonstrates that teachers provide more focused intervention when learners exhibit specific difficulties, particularly in foundational literacy. These approaches are consistent with the principle that instructional support should be responsive to the learner's present level of competence. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) identify guided instruction, structured learning tasks, and visual supports as practices that can improve comprehension and engagement, while van de Pol et al. (2020) emphasize that effective scaffolding involves adjusting assistance according to learner needs and gradually reducing support as learners become more capable. Fisher and Frey (2021) likewise emphasize structured progression from modeling and guided practice toward more independent performance. The present findings therefore indicate that teachers' adaptive practices function as bridges between what learners can currently accomplish and the competencies they are expected to achieve.

Most importantly, the findings show that teachers use assessment as a basis for instructional decision-making, making differentiation a continuous rather than one-time process. Participants use oral recitations, quizzes, classroom activities, and direct observation to determine whether learners understand lessons and to identify pupils requiring additional support. They then use these results to decide whether to reteach, modify an activity, provide remediation, change their instructional strategy, or proceed to the next lesson. Teachers specifically reported changing their methods when assessment results indicated that many learners had not understood the content, demonstrating that assessment serves an instructional rather than merely evaluative purpose. This practice is consistent with Black and Wiliam (2021), who emphasize the importance of formative assessment in generating information that can guide subsequent teaching and learning. Heritage (2020) similarly stresses that formative assessment enables teachers to make timely instructional adjustments, while Wiliam (2021) highlights the value of assessment evidence in supporting differentiated instruction. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that effective teaching in classrooms with uneven readiness levels involves an ongoing cycle of assessing, interpreting, adjusting, supporting, and reassessing. Teachers' instructional decisions are therefore not fixed before instruction begins; they continuously evolve according to evidence of learner progress. This responsive process is central to learner-centered instruction because it enables teachers to provide differentiated opportunities while maintaining common learning goals for the class.

Conclusions

This study concludes that instructional decision-making among Grade 3 teachers in classrooms with diverse learner readiness levels is a complex, adaptive, and reflective process shaped by both learner variability and contextual constraints. Teachers continuously adjust their instructional approaches to address the differing needs of learners, demonstrating flexibility through differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and assessment-informed strategies. Despite challenges such as limited time, insufficient resources, and classroom management difficulties, teachers exhibit resilience, creativity, and a strong commitment to inclusive learning. Their experiences highlight the critical need for enhanced instructional support, adequate resources, and targeted professional development to strengthen their capacity to effectively respond to learner diversity and improve overall teaching and learning outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that Grade 3 teachers continuously strengthen their instructional decision-making by using differentiated, flexible, learner-centered, and assessment-guided strategies that respond to learners' varying readiness levels. School heads should provide sustained instructional support through mentoring, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, relevant school-based training, adequate instructional materials, and opportunities for teacher collaboration. Curriculum planners and policymakers are encouraged to develop flexible and context-responsive curricula and strengthen policies, resources, professional development programs, and support systems that promote differentiated and inclusive instruction, particularly in early-grade classrooms. Educational stakeholders should actively support schools through resources, partnerships, and programs that contribute to improved learning environments, while parents and guardians should maintain active involvement in their children's learning and regular communication with teachers to reinforce learning at home. Finally, future researchers may extend the study to other grade levels, subject areas, and educational contexts and examine the long-term effectiveness of differentiated instructional strategies in improving learner achievement and supporting inclusive education.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

References

- [1] Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. doi:10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791
- [2] Department of Education. (2019). *Policy guidelines on the K to 12 Basic Education Program (DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2019)*. Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines.
- [3] Department of Education. (2020). *Interim policy guidelines for assessment and grading in light of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (DepEd Order No. 31, s. 2020)*. Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines.
- [4] Department of Education. (2023). *Adoption of the National Learning Recovery Program in the Department of Education (DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2023)*. Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines.
- [5] Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2021). *Better learning through structured teaching: A framework for the gradual release of responsibility* (3rd ed.). ASCD.
- [6] Heritage, M., & Wylie, E. C. (2020). *Formative assessment in the disciplines: Framing a continuum of professional learning*. Harvard Education Press.
- [7] Mandinach, E. B., & Schildkamp, K. (2021). The complexity of data-based decision making: An introduction to the special issue. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 69, 100906. doi:10.1016/j.stueduc.2020.100906
- [8] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2020). *TALIS 2018 results (Volume II): Teachers and school leaders as valued professionals*. OECD Publishing. doi:10.1787/19cf08df-en
- [9] Second Congressional Commission on Education. (2024). *Miseducation: The failed system of Philippine education—EDCOM II year one report*. Second Congressional Commission on Education.
- [10] Tomlinson, C. A. (2017). *How to differentiate instruction in academically diverse classrooms* (3rd ed.). ASCD.
- [11] UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education—All means all*. UNESCO. doi:10.54676/JJNK6989
- [12] World Bank, & UNESCO. (2022). *Philippines learning poverty brief*. World Bank.
- [13] Wiliam, D. (2018). *Embedded formative assessment* (2nd ed.). Solution Tree Press.