

Teachers' Early Implementation Experiences of the MATATAG Curriculum in the Philippines: Challenges, Adaptive Practices, and Policy Implications

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Abstract

The MATATAG Curriculum was introduced in the Philippines to streamline basic education and strengthen foundational learning. This qualitative study explored the early implementation experiences of 20 public and private school teachers in a highly urbanized city, focusing on the challenges encountered and their adaptive strategies. Data gathered through in-depth interviews and a focus-group discussion revealed that implementation was primarily hindered by combined logistical and pedagogical hurdles. Teachers struggled with accelerated lesson pacing, scarce aligned resources, difficulties in localizing content, and limited practical training, which exacerbated transition issues in early grades. To manage these obstacles, teachers demonstrated resilience through dynamic instructional adaptations. They modified teaching strategies, optimized classroom routines to address diverse learner needs, and relied heavily on professional collaboration to adjust curriculum delivery. Ultimately, the findings suggest that successful curriculum reform relies equally on intended design, adequate teacher preparation, timely provision of resources, and school-level structures that support instructional adaptation, offering vital practice-based evidence for ongoing policy and teacher development discussions.

Keywords: curriculum implementation, MATATAG Curriculum, Philippines, qualitative, teacher adaptation

1. Introduction

Curriculum reform is often presented as a technical response to persistent educational problems, yet research consistently shows that the success of reform depends not only on the quality of curricular design but also on how reform is implemented in classrooms. Across education systems, reform initiatives frequently encounter an implementation gap in which policy intentions, official documents, and formal timelines do not align neatly with the realities of teaching, learner readiness, school conditions, and available support. In their review of curriculum reform, Gouëdard et al. (2020) argue that effective curriculum change requires more than policy direction; it requires attention to context, stakeholder participation, coherence of support, and the conditions that allow reform to move from paper to practice. A related OECD framework on education policy implementation likewise emphasizes that reforms succeed or fail not simply because of their stated goals, but because of how they are interpreted, supported, and enacted across levels of the system (Viennet & Pont, 2017). These perspectives are especially relevant to school-based reforms because teachers do not merely transmit policy. They interpret reform, make sense of new demands, adjust materials, manage tensions, and often compensate for the limitations of implementation structures in their daily practice. As a result, teachers' early implementation experiences provide a crucial basis for understanding whether a curriculum reform is coherent, workable, and sustainable in actual school settings (Gouëdard et al., 2020; Viennet & Pont, 2017).

This implementation-centered view has become increasingly important in contemporary curriculum scholarship. Earlier models of reform tended to assume that a well-designed curriculum could be disseminated and adopted with relative fidelity. More recent work, however, recognizes that implementation is an interpretive and relational process shaped by organizational context, teacher professionalism, and the quality of instructional support. Brown et al. (2021), in a systematic review, note that teachers are often positioned as educational change agents, yet policy and research sometimes underestimate the complexity of that role. Teachers are expected to support reform while also responding to

classroom diversity, accountability demands, time pressures, and resource limitations. Similarly, studies on curriculum sense-making show that teachers do not read policy texts as neutral instructions; they interpret them through prior experience, subject knowledge, beliefs about learners, and contextual realities (Bümen & Holmqvist, 2022; Song & Lee, 2024). This means that the enacted curriculum is never a simple replication of the official curriculum. Rather, it is a situated and negotiated version of reform shaped by teachers' decisions in the course of actual instruction.

In the Philippines, this broader implementation problem has become especially salient in the introduction of the MATATAG Curriculum. The Department of Education positioned MATATAG as a major reform intended to address curriculum congestion and strengthen foundational learning in literacy, numeracy, and values education. The General Shaping Paper explains that the curriculum was redesigned to reduce overcrowding of competencies, sharpen focus on essentials, and establish clearer developmental progressions across basic education. In Grade 1, for example, the number of learning areas was reduced and reorganized in ways intended to prioritize foundational learning, while the phased rollout beginning in School Year 2024–2025 targeted Kindergarten, Grades 1, 4, and 7 as the first implementing levels (DepEd, 2023, 2024). These official documents show that MATATAG was framed not as a minor revision but as a structural curricular response to longstanding learning and implementation concerns.

The urgency of this reform must also be understood within the broader performance challenges of Philippine basic education. OECD's PISA 2022 Results showed that Filipino learners continued to perform below OECD averages in mathematics, reading, and science, and the Philippines' country note indicates that only a small proportion of students reached baseline proficiency levels in key domains (OECD, 2023). Although large-scale assessment results cannot by themselves determine the correct shape of reform, they provide a compelling backdrop for why foundational learning has become a central national concern. In this context, MATATAG may be seen as both a pedagogical and policy response: pedagogical because it seeks to make learning progression more coherent and manageable, and policy-driven because it attempts to align curriculum design with the need to improve learning quality at scale. However, the introduction of a more focused curriculum does not automatically ensure an easier or more effective implementation. The practical question remains whether teachers experience the reform as clear, supported, and responsive to classroom realities.

Philippine studies on curriculum implementation suggest that teachers often bear the practical burden of making reform workable. Bongco and David (2020), examining Filipino teachers' experiences as curriculum policy implementers in the evolving K to 12 landscape, found that teachers navigated reform through tension, ambiguity, and adaptation. Their study showed that policy implementation was experienced not as mechanical compliance but as a complex process involving negotiation, frustration, and professional responsibility. Likewise, Magallanes et al. (2022) found that teachers' concerns in educational reform clustered around the likely effects of reform and the need for collaboration, indicating that implementation is felt most strongly at the level of classroom consequence and professional interaction. These findings are especially useful for MATATAG because they suggest that teachers' perceptions of readiness, support, and practicality are central to whether reform becomes sustainable.

Related Philippine evidence also points to the importance of readiness and support in foundational and early-grade contexts. Jaca and Lopez-Baroman (2021), in their study of kindergarten curriculum implementation, documented challenges linked to teacher preparation, resource limitations, and the demands of translating curriculum into classroom practice. This is particularly relevant to MATATAG because its first phase includes grade levels that are developmentally sensitive and pedagogically foundational. Curriculum reform at these levels is not merely a matter of changing content; it affects how young learners transition into more structured academic demands, how teachers address foundational gaps, and how support systems enable or constrain early enactment. When readiness, materials, and practical guidance do not fully align with reform expectations, teachers in foundational grades are likely to experience implementation as both necessary and difficult.

International literature also underscores that teacher agency is a decisive element of reform enactment. Guerrero and Camargo-Abello (2023) show that teachers' agency shapes how early childhood policy programs are implemented in schools, while Yakavets et al. (2023) demonstrate that educational reform is reconstructed through teachers' practical judgments and professional responses. Brown et al. (2021) similarly argue that while teachers are frequently expected to function as change agents, the literature often reveals a mismatch between these expectations and the support they actually receive. Studies on curriculum sense-making reinforce the same point. Bümen and Holmqvist (2022) found that teachers adapt national curriculum documents through interpretation, while Song and Lee (2024) show that teachers' reading of curriculum documents directly affects how reform messages are understood and enacted. Taken together, these studies suggest that what teachers do with reform matters as much as what reform intends to accomplish.

Another important strand of literature concerns collaboration and support structures. Reform implementation is rarely sustained through individual effort alone. De Jong et al. (2022), in a systematic review, found that school-based

collaboration can serve as a meaningful context for teacher learning, provided that organizational conditions make such collaboration productive. More recent work also suggests that collaboration strengthens teacher growth when networks are intentional and connected to curriculum learning (Liou et al., 2025). These findings matter in the context of MATATAG because implementation demands are unlikely to be addressed solely through one-time orientations or top-down directives. Teachers often require ongoing opportunities for shared interpretation, joint resource development, and peer support if reform is to become stable in practice. Similarly, learner diversity remains a central issue even within streamlined curricula. Pozas et al. (2020) show that differentiated instruction remains essential in addressing varied student needs, while the logic of curriculum reform itself does not remove classroom heterogeneity. A less congested curriculum may improve focus, but teachers must still mediate that curriculum for learners with uneven readiness, learning preferences, and support needs.

Despite the policy significance of MATATAG, empirical evidence on teachers' early implementation experiences remains limited. Much of the available discourse has centered on policy rationale, curriculum documents, or general implementation guidance rather than on the day-to-day realities teachers encounter as they begin to enact the revised curriculum. That gap is important because the early phase of implementation often reveals where reform assumptions and classroom conditions most sharply intersect. It is during this phase that pacing pressures, training limitations, resource issues, localization demands, and learner readiness become especially visible. The present study addresses that gap by examining how teachers in selected schools in Davao City experienced the initial implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum, what challenges they encountered, how they adapted their practice, and what these experiences suggest for curriculum support. Specifically, the study asks: 1) What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum?, 2) What strategies do they use to respond to these challenges?, and 3) What implications emerge from these experiences for schools, the academe, and the wider education community? By answering these questions, the study contributes grounded, practice-based evidence to ongoing discussions of curriculum reform, teacher agency, and implementation support in Philippine basic education.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to generate a practice-near and analytically grounded account of teachers' early experiences in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum in actual school settings. Qualitative description is appropriate when the purpose of inquiry is to provide a clear, comprehensive, and low-inference account of participants' perspectives, actions, and experiences rather than to develop a formal theory or derive a highly abstract interpretive structure (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024; Sandelowski, 2000). The design was deemed suitable because the study sought to document how teachers experienced the initial rollout of the MATATAG Curriculum, what difficulties they encountered in day-to-day implementation, how they responded to those difficulties, and what insights emerged from their early enactment of the reform. In keeping with qualitative descriptive inquiry, the study remained close to participants' language and practice while organizing the data into thematically coherent patterns relevant to the research questions.

2.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted in selected public and private schools within the Davao City Division during School Year 2024–2025, the first phase of MATATAG implementation for Kindergarten, Grades 1, 4, and 7. The inquiry focused specifically on teachers handling Grades 1, 4, and 7, as these levels were among those directly affected by the initial phased implementation of the revised curriculum. These grade levels were considered particularly important because they represent key transition points in the basic education cycle and therefore provide a useful lens for examining early implementation realities under a major curriculum reform.

2.3 Participants and Sampling Procedure

The participants in this study consisted of 20 teachers from selected public and private schools in Davao City, with 10 coming from public schools and 10 from private schools. All participants were actively teaching Grades 1, 4, or 7 during School Year 2024–2025, the initial phase of MATATAG Curriculum implementation, and had at least three years of teaching experience. This inclusion criterion was set to ensure that participants had sufficient classroom experience to make meaningful comparisons between pre-MATATAG teaching demands and those associated with the revised curriculum, thereby allowing them to provide informed reflections on the transition.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically criterion-based purposive selection, to ensure that all those included had direct, current, and substantial involvement in the early implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum. Of the 20 participants, five took part in in-depth interviews, while 15 participated in one focus group discussion. This combination allowed the study to capture both detailed individual accounts and broader shared

experiences across different school contexts. The participant group consisted of 2 male and 18 female teachers ranging in age from 23 to 59 years. To protect their identity and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms and participant codes were used in all transcripts, analyses, and reports.

2.4 Data Collection Methods and Instrument

Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and a focus group discussion (FGD). These two data collection methods were chosen for complementary reasons. The in-depth interviews were used to obtain detailed, individualized narratives of teachers' experiences, especially with respect to classroom adjustments, instructional challenges, and personal reflections on curriculum implementation. The focus group discussion was used to capture interactional data, including shared concerns, points of agreement or variation, and collectively recognized implementation issues. Combining IDIs and FGD enabled the researchers to explore both the depth of individual accounts and the breadth of common experiences across participants. An interview guide was developed on the basis of the study objectives and research questions. The guide included open-ended prompts addressing teachers' experiences of MATATAG implementation, the challenges they encountered, the strategies they used to cope with these challenges, and their insights regarding the implications of the curriculum reform for learners, schools, and the wider education community. Follow-up probes were used during the interviews and group discussion to clarify responses, deepen descriptions, and elicit concrete examples from classroom practice.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Before the conduct of data collection, the researchers secured the necessary institutional permissions and ethical clearance in accordance with research protocols governing studies involving human participants. Approval to conduct the study was also obtained from the relevant school heads or administrators of participating schools. Prospective participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the procedures involved, and the intended use of the data. Written or documented informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. To protect confidentiality and privacy, identifying information was removed from the transcripts and all participants were assigned pseudonyms or participant codes during transcription, analysis, and reporting. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

2.6 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out in settings agreed upon by the researchers and participants and scheduled at times that did not disrupt school duties. With participants' permission, the interviews and focus group discussion were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of capture. Field notes were also prepared during and immediately after data collection to document contextual observations, notable participant emphases, group dynamics in the FGD, and preliminary analytic reflections. These field notes were used to supplement transcript-based analysis and to preserve contextual features that may not have been fully evident in the recorded verbal data alone.

2.7 Transcription and Familiarization

Following data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Where participants used Filipino, Cebuano, or mixed expressions, the responses were translated into English for analytic consistency and reporting, while care was taken to preserve the intended meaning of the statements. The researchers reviewed the transcripts repeatedly to check transcription accuracy against the recordings and to become familiar with the content before formal coding began. This process of repeated reading served as the first stage of immersion and supported a close engagement with participants' accounts.

2.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analytic process consistent with qualitative descriptive inquiry. The researchers first read the transcripts several times to gain an overall sense of the data and identify preliminary meaning units relevant to the research questions. Segments of text that reflected teachers' experiences, concerns, responses, and insights regarding MATATAG implementation were then highlighted and assigned initial codes. These codes remained close to participants' language and were intended to reflect concrete implementation realities rather than highly abstract constructs. After initial coding, similar or related codes were compared across transcripts and grouped into broader categories. The categories were then examined for conceptual coherence and clustered into candidate themes. Through iterative review, refinement, and comparison with the original transcripts, final themes were generated to represent the major patterns in the data. These themes were organized according to the study's guiding concerns: implementation challenges, coping or adaptive strategies, and implementation-related insights. Throughout the analytic process, the researchers continuously returned to the original transcripts to ensure that the developing themes remained grounded in participants' actual accounts.

2.9 Trustworthiness of the Study

To strengthen the credibility and dependability of the findings, the study used several strategies appropriate to qualitative inquiry. First, method triangulation was employed through the use of both in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, allowing the researchers to compare whether similar issues emerged across different forms of data. Second, the researchers maintained close adherence to the raw data during coding and theme generation to minimize overinterpretation and preserve the descriptive character of the study. Third, transcript review and repeated reading were undertaken to enhance familiarity with the data and improve coding consistency. Fourth, the inclusion of both public and private school teachers provided a modest degree of contextual variation, which enriched the analysis and allowed the study to capture a wider range of implementation realities. Finally, direct participant quotations were retained in the results section to demonstrate the evidentiary basis of the themes and allow readers to assess the analytic fit between the data and the reported findings.

3. Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of teachers' accounts of their early experiences in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum. The results are organized into two major domains that reflect the study's central concerns: the challenges teachers encountered during implementation and the strategies they used to cope with these challenges. Within each domain, the findings are presented through specific themes that capture recurring patterns across participants' narratives, supported by selected verbatim quotations to illustrate the evidentiary basis of each theme.

3.1 Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing the MATATAG Curriculum

3.1.1 Accelerated Lesson Pacing

A dominant concern in the data was the accelerated pace of instruction under the revised curriculum. Teachers described the new curriculum as requiring them to move from one topic to another too quickly, often before learners had achieved sufficient understanding of the previous lesson. They repeatedly linked this compressed pacing to weak mastery and reduced retention, especially in foundational subjects where students typically need repeated practice and reinforcement. Teachers also noted that the reordering of topics from the previous curriculum created additional confusion, particularly for young learners who were still developing basic academic routines.

One participant described the strain of trying to implement the curriculum while still learning how to interpret and apply it:

"We are still trying to cope with the MATATAG Curriculum. We are still figuring out how to apply it so that we can meet its objectives right away. We were not yet ready. I was not yet prepared because until now we are still studying the exemplars being given to us. We read the exemplars every day. It feels like we had to learn, relearn, and unlearn many things." (Alpha)

Another participant emphasized how the daily shift in topics disrupted mastery, particularly in Grade 1 mathematics:

"One of our challenges, especially in the first quarter, was that we had to chase the lessons. For example, in Math, the lesson today is different from the lesson tomorrow. Unlike in the old K–12 curriculum, one topic could take a week so that the children could develop mastery. Now the topic changes every day. Especially in Grade 1, where the learners are just coming from Kindergarten, it is really very challenging." (Charlie)

A related account also highlighted the abruptness of the transition and the inadequacy of preparation time:

"The new curriculum was surprising because the shift from K–12 happened very fast. We had only a one-week seminar, yet during actual implementation I had real difficulty in knowing how to approach the objectives because the competencies were so compressed." (IDI_P2)

3.1.2 Resource Accessibility and Preparation

A second major challenge involved the lack of accessible, timely, and aligned instructional materials. Teachers reported that the early phase of implementation was marked by incomplete learning resources, delayed distribution of books and exemplars, and limited access to multimedia tools. This constrained lesson planning and forced teachers to rely heavily on lesson exemplars, often without the support of complete modules, textbooks, or supplementary teaching resources. The result was an increased preparation burden, since teachers had to produce or adapt materials on their own while simultaneously trying to understand the curriculum itself.

One participant described the uncertainty caused by delayed exemplars:

"Now we are almost finished with the second quarter, yet we are still relying on the lesson exemplars. The third-quarter exemplars have not yet arrived, and the examinations are already approaching. We are still waiting." (Charlie)

The data also suggest that resource availability differed by school context. While many participants described shortages, at least one teacher from a better-resourced private setting reported that having an instructional resource provider significantly reduced preparation demands and allowed teachers to focus more clearly on the essential competencies to be taught. This contrast indicates that teachers' experiences of MATATAG were shaped not only by the curriculum itself but also by the level of school-based support available to them.

3.1.3 Localization of Learning Content

Teachers also identified localization as a major challenge in the implementation process. Although they recognized the value of contextualizing lessons to students' local realities, they reported that the process demanded additional effort, research, and interpretation. Participants described having to adapt national exemplars to local contexts with minimal guidance, and some noted that this produced inconsistencies across schools and districts. In practice, localization became a task that depended heavily on teacher initiative rather than on a clear, standardized support structure.

A teacher handling Music, Arts, Physical Education, and Health (MAPEH) explained the burden of localizing nationally framed materials:

"We do not have another source, so our source is really our own research. In MAPEH we are having difficulty because the lesson exemplar comes from the national level, and we still need to localize it. Since it has not yet been localized for us, we have to do our own research so that we can localize our teaching. And even then, we do not always have a common understanding." (Gordon)

The same concern appeared in relation to regional mismatch:

"Usually, our topic is from Luzon. In the first quarter we had to localize it, so how exactly are we supposed to localize that?" (Gordon)

A participant teaching Araling Panlipunan described the lack of literature and supporting texts needed to contextualize discussions:

"In Araling Panlipunan, the problem is that there is a lack of literature and books, especially the information needed for the discussion. The necessary materials are lacking. Sometimes we still need to go to the library." (Sierra)

These accounts show that localization was valued in principle but difficult in practice. Teachers had to bridge national content and local relevance on their own, often without sufficient materials or clear guidance, making localization a labor-intensive and unevenly supported dimension of implementation.

3.1.4 Training and Professional Development

Another key finding was the limited practical preparation teachers received before the rollout. Participants acknowledged that seminars and orientations were conducted, yet many felt that the training was too brief and too focused on unpacking curriculum guides rather than on practical classroom enactment. Teachers described entering implementation with incomplete clarity on pacing, delivery strategies, and how to handle the complexities of the revised curriculum, particularly in the early grades.

One participant summarized this concern clearly:

"The main problem is that teachers did not have enough time to fully understand the MATATAG Curriculum because we had very few seminars. We had some, but not many, and most of those seminars were only about unpacking the curriculum. There were not enough strategies." (Fox)

Another participant emphasized how short the preparation period was:

"What is lacking in the MATATAG Curriculum is the short time we had to prepare before applying it. We had only a three-day seminar, and that was not enough." (Echo)

A related response reinforced the same point:

"It was really not enough because the seminar and training lasted only three days. We trained before the school year started, and then immediately we had to implement it. We were even told that MATATAG requires a high level of explanation, yet it was taught to us in almost just one day." (Gordon)

These responses indicate that teachers did not question the need for professional development itself. Rather, they questioned its depth, timing, and practical usefulness. The data suggest that teachers needed more applied and sustained preparation before being expected to enact a major curriculum transition.

3.1.5 Transition Issues in the Early Grades

The final challenge theme concerned the implementation of MATATAG in the early grades, where teachers described a difficult transition from prior learner habits and developmental levels to the demands of the revised curriculum.

Participants observed that many children lacked foundational skills in reading, writing, and numeracy, and that these gaps made it difficult for them to keep pace with the curriculum's expectations. Teachers also linked these learning difficulties to behavioral and engagement issues, including short attention spans and dependence on gadgets.

One participant explained how gadget use and changing classroom expectations affected writing and engagement:

"Children today are very fond of gadgets, so they become reluctant to write. That is the challenge as a teacher. You do everything just to make them write and listen. In Kindergarten, spoon-feeding is sometimes unavoidable, but in Grade 1 it can no longer be that way, so you really have to create different strategies that will work." (Delta)

Another teacher raised concern about curricular discontinuity in MAPEH:

"I am really worried because there is no MAPEH in Grade 1, yet the basics of MAPEH should begin early. Then by Grade 4 it is no longer basic. How will I teach it later if the students did not go through that foundation in Grade 1?" (Holly)

This theme shows that transition issues in the early grades were not limited to academic readiness alone. They also involved developmental adjustment, classroom behavior, and the consequences of removing or rearranging foundational content across grade levels.

3.2 Coping Strategies Used by Teachers in Implementing the MATATAG Curriculum

3.2.1 Varying Strategies and Instructional Materials

Teachers responded to the demands of the MATATAG Curriculum by actively modifying how lessons were presented and by developing instructional materials that were more accessible to learners. Rather than relying solely on the provided exemplars, participants described simplifying difficult terms, adding local examples, consulting external resources, creating supplementary handouts, incorporating games, and revisiting lessons when students lacked the necessary foundation. These responses show that teachers coped not by following the curriculum mechanically, but by reshaping it into forms that were more understandable and more responsive to student needs.

One participant emphasized the role of game-based teaching in making lessons more engaging:

"MATATAG is really outcome-based. The kinds of activities it calls for are very engaging. In Math, gamification really helps, so the children enjoy it. There is no dull moment." (Mike)

Another teacher explained that repeated review became necessary because some topics in the revised curriculum were broader and less familiar than those in the old curriculum:

"Review is really necessary. We have to look back because some of the topics in the MATATAG Curriculum are very broad, and in the previous curriculum we were not able to cover these topics much because they used to come later." (Nova)

These accounts indicate that teachers used instructional variation both to sustain engagement and to compensate for gaps in prior knowledge. Their coping strategies were therefore pedagogical and restorative at the same time: they aimed to keep students interested while also rebuilding the foundations needed for the new curriculum.

3.2.2 Optimizing Resources and Classroom Management

A second coping strategy involved maximizing available resources and reorganizing classroom routines to make instruction possible despite material and spatial limitations. Teachers described extending their work hours to prepare new materials, searching independently for resources, collaborating with peers from other schools, adjusting classroom schedules, and using digital tools to reduce preparation time. These responses suggest that classroom and resource management became a central survival strategy during the early implementation period.

One participant described the burden of having to create new materials from scratch during the first year of implementation:

"Before, we already had old materials from K–12. Since this is the first year of the MATATAG Curriculum, we are still preparing new materials and extending our time. We still have to make materials, and we end up arriving very early and going home very late." (Fox)

Another participant explained how teachers built informal support systems across schools to compensate for resource shortages:

"We have a group chat with teachers from other schools. We share resources with one another, so at least we stay connected. There are people who send us PowerPoint presentations." (Gordon)

A third participant described using artificial intelligence to make lesson preparation more efficient:

"I already have the idea, so for my lesson what I do now is focus on how I can explain it to the children. My way of doing that is through AI." (Nova)

Classroom space constraints were also part of this coping process. One teacher shared how limited classroom availability required them to improvise constantly:

"We also have to look for resources and even for spaces because we lack classrooms. Since we are an emergency class, morning or afternoon, you really have to find where you can place the children." (Mike)

Together, these responses show that teachers coped not only by working harder but by becoming more resourceful, networked, and technologically adaptive. Their efforts extended beyond lesson delivery and included managing time, space, materials, and collegial support systems.

3.2.3 Diverse Learner Considerations

Teachers also coped by deliberately adjusting instruction to accommodate learner diversity. Participants recognized that students differed in readiness, pacing, learning style, and confidence, and they viewed differentiated instruction as necessary rather than optional. Their strategies included preparing activities at different levels of difficulty, using group tasks to encourage peer support, allowing learners more time where needed, and creating opportunities for students to express understanding in different ways.

One participant described differentiating tasks according to students' ability levels:

"In my class, not all students can master the lesson at the same time, so differentiated activities are really necessary. There are children who are advanced, and for them we prepare something more challenging. But for those who are not yet ready, we prepare easier activities." (Holly)

Another participant highlighted the role of group activities, especially in Grade 1:

"In Grade 1 under MATATAG, we do not really have experiments, but we have many performance tasks. The children like those, especially group activities." (Delta)

Respect for individual pacing also emerged clearly in the data:

"We have to give children space and respect their pacing because some are fast and some are slow. If you do not do that, you take away their opportunity to express themselves." (Echo)

The same participant further emphasized the need to vary instruction according to learning style:

"Learners are really different. Some are kinesthetic, some are visual, and some are auditory. If you confine them to only one kind of classroom approach, they will not really learn." (Echo)

These responses show that teachers' coping strategies were deeply tied to inclusive practice. They were not simply delivering content more slowly or more creatively; they were actively trying to preserve learner participation and understanding within a highly varied classroom environment.

3.2.4 Curriculum Adjustment Strategies

Another coping pattern involved adjusting curriculum delivery itself. Teachers reported reviewing topics from the old curriculum, revising strategies to address the reordering of lessons, simplifying broad content, and improvising methods based on students' immediate responses. This theme suggests that coping required teachers to mediate between the formal sequence of the revised curriculum and the actual learning conditions they encountered in class.

One participant described how revisiting and reviewing prior content became an important bridge strategy:

"Review is really necessary. We have to go back because some of the topics in the MATATAG Curriculum are very broad, and these were not emphasized much in the last curriculum because they usually came later." (Nova)

This response shows that teachers were not simply reteaching for repetition's sake. Rather, they were using review as a curricular bridge, helping learners cope with changes in sequencing and concept progression. The coded findings in the manuscript further indicate that teachers simplified broad topics, focused on key learning outcomes, and improvised teaching methods when immediate student needs required it. These strategies reflect active curriculum mediation rather than fixed delivery.

3.2.5 Professional Development and Collaboration

The final coping theme centered on professional learning and collaboration. Teachers drew on whatever they had gained from seminars and workshops, but they also relied heavily on collaboration with peers to improve strategies and solve implementation problems. They engaged in resource sharing, collaborative teaching, and support for less experienced colleagues as ways of responding to the gaps left by limited formal training.

4. Discussion

The findings of the study show that early MATATAG implementation was not experienced by teachers as a straightforward process of applying a revised curriculum guide. Rather, implementation required continuous mediation between reform intentions and classroom realities. This pattern strongly reflects the broader literature on curriculum implementation, which has long argued that reform becomes meaningful only through the work of enactment. Gouëdard et al. (2020) describe curriculum reform as vulnerable to an implementation gap in which official aspirations must pass through complex institutional and pedagogical conditions before they reach classrooms. Viennet and Pont (2017) similarly argue that effective policy implementation depends on how actors interpret reform, how support is organized, and how classroom-level realities are accounted for in the implementation process. The present findings fit squarely within this perspective. Although MATATAG was officially designed to decongest the curriculum and strengthen focus on foundational learning, teachers still encountered substantial complexity in relation to pacing, materials, localization, training, and learner readiness. This suggests that curriculum streamlining on paper does not automatically translate into reduced implementation burden in practice.

The issue of accelerated lesson pacing is one of the clearest examples of this gap between curricular design and classroom enactment. Participants in the study described difficulty balancing the expected flow of lessons with learners' actual readiness and mastery, especially in foundational or transition grades. This finding suggests that pacing should not be understood merely as a technical scheduling matter. Rather, it is a pedagogical issue closely tied to comprehension, retention, confidence, and the ability of teachers to consolidate learning. MATATAG may have reduced curricular congestion formally, but when students enter classrooms with unfinished learning or weak foundational competencies, teachers still face pressure to move through content quickly while simultaneously reinforcing basic skills. The result is that a curriculum intended to be more manageable may still feel demanding in implementation. This interpretation is consistent with the Philippine and international literature showing that reform becomes difficult not only because of what is added to the curriculum, but because of the conditions under which teachers must deliver it (Bongco & David, 2020; Gouëdard et al., 2020).

The findings on resource accessibility and preparation further reinforce the view that implementation depends on more than policy intent. Teachers in the study reported incomplete or delayed materials, dependence on exemplars, and the need to create or localize their own teaching resources. This is significant because it shows that even when a reform aims for curricular clarity, teachers may still experience practical uncertainty if materials are not fully aligned, timely, and usable. In effect, curricular simplification may reduce the breadth of content while leaving intact, or even intensifying, the preparation burden on teachers during rollout. This supports the argument that reform quality cannot be judged by policy design alone; it must also be judged by the adequacy of the support architecture surrounding implementation. Such a pattern is consistent with Viennet and Pont's (2017) framework, which emphasizes the importance of implementation conditions, and with earlier Philippine evidence showing that teachers often work through ambiguity and adaptation rather than through complete structural support (Bongco & David, 2020).

The challenge of localization adds another important layer to the interpretation of the findings. Teachers in the study generally valued the goal of contextualizing instruction to local realities, yet they also experienced localization as labor-intensive and unevenly supported. This suggests that contextual responsiveness, while pedagogically desirable, can become a source of strain when teachers are expected to generate localized content largely on their own. The literature on teacher sense-making helps explain this pattern. Bümen and Holmqvist (2022) argue that curriculum adaptation is shaped by how teachers interpret policy documents within their particular contexts, while Song and Lee (2024) show that teachers' reading of curriculum texts affects how reform messages are understood and operationalized. The present findings reflect a similar process. Localization was not simply a mandated task; it became a site of interpretation in which teachers had to determine what contextualization meant, how far it should go, and how it could remain aligned with curricular expectations. In this sense, localization under MATATAG appears to be both a pedagogical opportunity and an implementation burden.

The findings related to training and professional development likewise reveal a gap between reform introduction and reform readiness. Teachers acknowledged receiving seminars or orientations, but many felt that these were too brief and too focused on unpacking curriculum documents rather than on practical classroom enactment. This finding is important because it highlights the distinction between being informed about a reform and being prepared to teach it. It also aligns with prior Philippine evidence. Magallanes et al. (2022) found that teachers' concerns during educational reform were strongly linked to how reform would affect practice and to the collaborative supports available to them. Jaca and Lopez-Baroman (2021) similarly documented readiness-related issues in early-grade curriculum implementation. Together with the present findings, these studies suggest that training for curriculum reform must move beyond orientation and toward applied, sustained, classroom-connected support. Teachers need not only to understand the content of reform but also to develop confidence in pacing, strategy use, content sequencing, and adaptation for diverse learners.

At the same time, the study clearly demonstrates that teachers were not passive recipients of reform. Their reported coping strategies, including modifying exemplars, simplifying terminology, differentiating activities, revisiting prior lessons, adjusting curriculum delivery, and sharing resources with peers, reveal active forms of teacher agency. This is strongly supported by international scholarship. Guerrero and Camargo-Abello (2023) show that teachers exercise agency in how policy programs are enacted in schools, while Yakavets et al. (2023) demonstrate that reform is reconstructed through teachers' practical judgments and pedagogical responses. Brown et al. (2021) also note that teachers are frequently expected to act as change agents, even though this role is often complicated by policy and organizational constraints. The present findings fit this literature closely. Teachers did not adapt because the reform was irrelevant to them; they adapted because implementation required translation, reconstruction, and professional judgment in order to become workable for students. Their agency was therefore not oppositional to reform. It was central to reform enactment itself.

The importance of collaboration in the findings also deserves sustained attention. Teachers' reliance on collegial exchange, shared materials, group chats, and informal peer support suggests that collaboration functioned as a practical mechanism for reducing uncertainty and sustaining implementation. This is consistent with the work of de Jong et al. (2022), who found that school-based collaboration can serve as a learning context for teachers, and with Liou et al. (2025), who show that collaborative conditions can strengthen teacher professional growth when they are intentionally connected to curriculum learning. In the present study, collaboration did not appear as an abstract professional virtue. It operated as a compensatory support system through which teachers shared interpretations, addressed shortages, and refined practice. This suggests that reform implementation is not solely an individual classroom challenge. It is also a collective organizational task. Where formal supports are incomplete, collaborative cultures may partially absorb the shock of reform, though they should not be expected to replace systematic institutional preparation.

Another important implication concerns learner diversity. Teachers in the study described adapting lessons through grouping, scaffolding, differentiated activities, flexible pacing, and varied instructional modes because students differed widely in readiness and response. These findings reinforce the argument of Pozas et al. (2020) that differentiated instruction remains essential in addressing student diversity. In the MATATAG context, this is especially significant. A streamlined curriculum may reduce overload, but it does not eliminate heterogeneity in classrooms. Students still vary in prior knowledge, foundational skills, confidence, and learning preferences. As a result, the effectiveness of curriculum reform remains tied to teachers' ability to mediate content in inclusive and responsive ways. The study therefore suggests that the success of MATATAG depends not only on curricular focus but also on whether implementation structures recognize the continuing necessity of differentiated pedagogy, especially in foundational grades where learner gaps are more visible and consequential.

Taken together, the findings suggest that MATATAG implementation depends on more than policy clarity or curriculum design. It requires a support architecture that includes practical pre-implementation preparation, timely and aligned instructional resources, clearer guidance for localization, realistic pacing expectations, and structures for collaborative problem solving within schools. Where these conditions are weak, teachers compensate through extra labor, improvisation, and informal networks of professional support. While such adaptability is a professional strength, curriculum reform cannot remain sustainable if it depends mainly on teachers' willingness to absorb systemic gaps. This point is consistent with both the implementation literature and the policy logic of reform itself. Viennet and Pont (2017) emphasize that implementation quality depends on support structures and contextual alignment, while MATATAG's own policy rationale rests on the promise of coherence and manageability (DepEd, 2023, 2024). The present findings suggest that such coherence must be built not only into curriculum documents but also into the conditions under which teachers enact them.

This study is limited by its qualitative and context-specific design. The participants were drawn from selected schools in one division, and the findings are therefore not intended to be statistically generalized to all MATATAG implementation settings in the Philippines. In addition, the study captures early implementation experiences rather than long-term instructional effects or learner outcome trends. Even so, its contribution remains important. By documenting how teachers experienced pacing, preparation, localization, collaboration, and learner diversity during the early rollout of a major reform, the study provides grounded evidence that can inform implementation refinement. At a time when the MATATAG Curriculum continues to unfold across grade levels and school contexts, such evidence is valuable for educational leaders seeking to align policy ambition with classroom feasibility.

5. Conclusion

This study examined teachers' early implementation experiences of the MATATAG Curriculum in selected schools in Davao City. The findings show that teachers encountered substantial challenges related to pacing, resources, localization, training, and learner transition, yet they also responded with adaptive instructional, organizational, and

collaborative practices. These findings suggest that teachers functioned as active curriculum mediators who translated reform into practice under constrained conditions.

The study contributes to the growing literature on curriculum reform by showing that early implementation success depends not only on the technical design of a revised curriculum but also on the conditions that enable teachers to enact it. For MATATAG, this means that reform support should prioritize applied training, timely and aligned materials, clearer localization guidance, strengthened school-based collaboration, and implementation structures attentive to learner readiness. Future studies may build on these findings through longitudinal and multi-site research that examines how teacher adaptation evolves over time and how implementation conditions relate to student learning outcomes.

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Author contributions

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