



Undiagnosed Developmental Delays Among School Children: Implications for Teachers

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Abstract

This study examined teachers' observations of suspected developmental delays among public elementary school learners and their implications for instructional support and inclusive education. Specifically, it identifies developmental indicators frequently observed by teachers, examines perceived educational impacts, determines the association between teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact, and identifies instructional strategies and institutional support needs. A quantitative descriptive-correlational design was employed with 64 public elementary school teachers from Bantayan Central Elementary School, Cebu, Philippines, during School Year 2024–2025. Data were collected using an adapted Five-to-Fifteen-Revised Teacher Questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. Teachers frequently observed concerns across literacy and language, mathematics and numeracy, memory and retention, attention and focus, problem-solving, executive functioning, social-emotional development, and study and academic skills. Teachers reported positive perceptions regarding their capacity and responsibility to support learners with suspected developmental concerns, while the perceived educational impact was rated very high. A significant positive association was found between teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact. Teachers also identified professional development, parent-support programs, instructional materials, smaller class sizes, and access to special education professionals as important institutional needs. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening teacher professional development, systematic school-based observation and referral procedures, multidisciplinary collaboration, and evidence-informed instructional support. Classroom observations should complement, rather than replace, formal multidisciplinary assessment.

Keywords

developmental concerns, inclusive education, early identification, teacher perception, instructional support

How to Cite

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Author Contributions

The authors contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, and supervision. The authors approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

INTRODUCTION

Developmental difficulties can affect children's language, cognition, attention, executive functioning, social participation, and academic learning during the years when foundational educational competencies are established. Consequently, early recognition and appropriate intervention are important components of educational and developmental support. International guidance emphasizes developmental surveillance and screening as mechanisms for identifying children who may require further assessment and intervention (Lipkin & Macias, 2020). Evidence also indicates that developmental conditions may remain unidentified even among children who access developmental services, highlighting the importance of effective pathways between observation, screening, assessment, and intervention (Delahunty et al., 2022). Within inclusive education systems, timely recognition of developmental and learning concerns is therefore relevant to equitable participation and responsive educational provision (OECD, 2023; Burningham et al., 2026).

In the Philippine educational context, inclusive education has been strengthened through legislative and policy initiatives that emphasize equitable access, learner support, identification, and referral. Republic Act No. 10533 established a learner-centered and inclusive basic education framework, while Republic Act No. 11650 strengthened the institutional provision of inclusive education services for learners with disabilities. DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022, further established the Child Find Policy for Learners with Disabilities Toward Inclusive Education, emphasizing procedures for identifying learners who may require specialized educational support. Teachers occupy an important observational position within this framework because they interact with learners regularly and can recognize persistent patterns in classroom participation, communication, academic performance, attention, and behavior. Nevertheless, teacher observations should be understood as educational evidence that can inform referral and support rather than as substitutes for comprehensive developmental or clinical assessment (Hirata & Ozawa, 2023; Coker et al., 2024).

Previous research has extensively examined developmental disabilities, screening, inclusive education, and educational interventions. However, less attention has been directed toward teachers' classroom observations of learners who display developmental concerns before formal assessment, particularly in public elementary schools situated in geographically constrained settings. Existing evidence has frequently focused on clinically diagnosed populations or healthcare contexts, providing comparatively less information about teachers' experiences of recognizing developmental concerns within routine classroom activities. This creates an empirical and contextual gap concerning the indicators teachers observe, the educational consequences they perceive, the instructional strategies they employ, and the institutional resources they consider necessary before formal assessment occurs. Examining these classroom-level observations may contribute to the development of appropriate school-based identification, referral, and instructional-support mechanisms without equating teacher observations with clinical diagnosis.

This study examines teachers' observations of suspected developmental delays among learners at Bantayan Central Elementary School in Cebu Province. Specifically, it identifies the developmental indicators most frequently observed across major developmental and academic domains, examines teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact, determines the association between these constructs, and identifies instructional strategies and institutional support needs. The study involved 64 public elementary school teachers during School Year 2024–2025. Its contribution lies in providing context-specific evidence concerning teacher-observed developmental concerns and the resources teachers identify as necessary for inclusive classroom practice. Because the study relies on teacher reports from a single school and does not include independent clinical or developmental assessments, its findings are interpreted as evidence of suspected developmental concerns rather than confirmed developmental diagnoses.

METHODOLOGY

Design

A quantitative descriptive-correlational research design was employed to examine teachers' observations and perceptions regarding learners exhibiting suspected developmental concerns. The descriptive component was used to characterize the developmental indicators observed by teachers, their perceptions of supporting learners, the perceived educational impact of these concerns, and the instructional strategies and institutional resources reported by respondents. The correlational component was used to examine the association between teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact without manipulating the study variables. The design was appropriate because the study sought to describe existing classroom experiences and examine naturally occurring relationships among teacher-reported constructs. The correlational analysis does not establish causality; therefore, relationships identified in the study are interpreted as statistical associations rather than evidence that one construct causes changes in the other.

Locale and Participants

The study was conducted at Bantayan Central Elementary School in Cebu Province, Philippines, during School Year 2024–2025. The participants were 64 public elementary school teachers with regular classroom assignments and direct instructional responsibilities. Total enumeration sampling was employed because all teachers who met the study's eligibility criteria were invited to participate. Eligible respondents were teachers with regular classroom assignments who had experience teaching learners exhibiting possible developmental concerns. Teachers without classroom assignments and those on extended leave during the data-collection period were excluded. The sample represents the participating teachers within the study school and should not be interpreted as nationally representative of Philippine elementary teachers or as an estimate of the prevalence of developmental delays among Filipino children.

Instrument

Data were collected using an adapted version of the Five-to-Fifteen-Revised (5–15R) Teacher Questionnaire. The instrument assessed classroom-observed indicators across eight domains: literacy and language, mathematics and

numeracy, memory and retention, attention and focus, problem-solving and critical thinking, executive functioning, social-emotional development, and study and academic skills. The instrument was adapted for the context of the study. The submitted research record reports internal-consistency coefficients ranging from 0.798 to 0.856 across the instrument's components, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Collection

Following authorization from the school administration, the researcher distributed printed questionnaires to eligible teachers. The purpose and procedures of the study were explained to prospective participants, informed consent was obtained, and respondents were provided sufficient time to complete the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were retrieved, checked for completeness, encoded, and prepared for statistical analysis.

Analysis

Frequency counts and percentages were used to summarize respondent characteristics. Frequencies and rankings were used to identify the most frequently observed developmental indicators and reported instructional strategies and support needs. Weighted means and standard deviations were calculated to summarize teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact at the 0.05 significance level. Pearson's correlation was interpreted as a measure of linear association between the two constructs and not as evidence of causation. The analysis produced a statistically significant positive association between teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact, $r = .419$, $p = .001$. The squared correlation ($r^2 = .176$) indicates that approximately 17.6% of the variance was shared between the two teacher-reported measures in this sample. This statistic should be interpreted cautiously because the study was cross-sectional and based on self-reported perceptions.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's purpose and procedures before providing informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding personally identifiable information from the questionnaires and presenting findings in aggregate form. Collected data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Limitations and Rigor

The findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. First, the study was conducted in a single public elementary school and included 64 teachers, limiting the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the study relied on teacher-reported observations rather than independent developmental, psychological, or clinical assessments. Consequently, the observed indicators should be interpreted as suspected developmental concerns rather than confirmed developmental delays or disabilities. Third, the correlational design permits examination of association but does not establish causal relationships. Fourth, self-reported responses may be influenced by teachers' professional experience, expectations, or interpretations of questionnaire items. Rigor was supported by the use of a structured instrument, standardized data-collection procedures, reported internal-consistency coefficients, and statistical techniques aligned with the descriptive and correlational objectives. Future research should strengthen methodological rigor through multisite sampling, independent assessment data, longitudinal designs, and multiple stakeholder perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 64 respondents. The sample was predominantly female (85.94%), while the largest age group was 46–55 years (46.88%). Most respondents had completed master's degree units (75.00%), and 62.50% had 16 or more years of teaching experience. Despite this extensive professional experience, 59.38% reported that they had not received formal training related to developmental delays.

The findings indicate that the respondents generally possessed substantial teaching experience and postgraduate academic exposure but had comparatively limited formal preparation specifically related to developmental concerns. Professional experience may support teachers' recognition of persistent classroom patterns; however, experience and postgraduate education do not necessarily provide specialized preparation in developmental screening or differential identification. Previous research similarly emphasizes the importance of teacher preparation and institutional support in inclusive educational practice (Coker et al., 2024; Hirata & Ozawa, 2023).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 64)

Variable	Category	<i>f</i>	%
Gender	Female	55	85.94
	Male	9	14.06
Age	26–35 years	8	12.50
	36–45 years	15	23.44
	46–55 years	30	46.88
	Above 55 years	11	17.19
Highest Educational Attainment	Bachelor's degree	16	25.00
	With master's units	48	75.00
Field of Specialization	General Education	14	21.88
	Early Childhood Education	10	15.63
	Science	7	10.94
	English	6	9.38

Variable	Category	<i>f</i>	%
Length of Service	Mathematics	6	9.38
	Social Studies	6	9.38
	Filipino	5	7.81
	Special Education	4	6.25
	Home Economics	4	6.25
	Physical Education	2	3.13
	1–5 years	7	10.94
	6–10 years	4	6.25
	11–15 years	13	20.31
	16 years and above	40	62.50
Training on Developmental Delays	Received	26	40.63
	Not received	38	59.38

Table 2 summarizes the highest-frequency indicator reported within each developmental domain. Teachers reported concerns across literacy and language, mathematics and numeracy, memory and retention, attention and focus, problem-solving and critical thinking, executive functioning, social-emotional development, and study and academic skills. Within literacy and language, the most frequently reported indicator was limited vocabulary for age or difficulty understanding complex words ($f = 51$). Difficulty understanding basic mathematical concepts was the most frequently reported mathematics and numeracy concern ($f = 49$). Difficulty remembering instructions or steps in a process was the most frequently reported concern in memory and retention ($f = 53$).

In attention and focus, teachers most frequently reported difficulty following multi-step directions and completing assignments independently ($f = 49$). Difficulty with logical reasoning and abstract thinking was the most frequently reported problem-solving indicator ($f = 48$), while difficulty organizing tasks and instructional materials was the leading executive-functioning concern ($f = 49$). In the social-emotional domain, difficulty understanding and responding to social cues was most frequently reported ($f = 53$). In study and academic skills, inconsistent academic performance across learning tasks was the most frequently identified indicator ($f = 46$). The distribution of reported indicators suggests that teachers encounter developmental and learning concerns across multiple areas of classroom functioning rather than within a single academic domain. This multidimensional pattern is consistent with literature linking language, memory, executive functioning, attention, and academic performance (Jin et al., 2020; Pham & Archibald, 2022; Zheng et al., 2022). However, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that the learners represented in teachers' reports have clinically diagnosed developmental disorders. Classroom observations provide important educational information but require appropriate professional assessment for diagnostic determination (Delahunty et al., 2022).

Table 2
Highest-Frequency Teacher-Observed Indicator Within Each Developmental Domain

Developmental Domain	Highest-Frequency Indicator	<i>f</i>
Literacy and Language	Limited vocabulary for age or difficulty understanding complex words	51
Mathematics and Numeracy	Difficulty understanding basic mathematical concepts	49
Memory and Retention	Difficulty remembering instructions or steps in a process	53
Attention and Focus	Difficulty following multi-step directions and completing assignments independently	49
Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking	Difficulty with logical reasoning and abstract thinking	48
Executive Functioning	Difficulty organizing tasks and instructional materials	49
Social and Emotional	Difficulty understanding and responding to social cues	53
Study and Academic Skills	Inconsistent academic performance across learning tasks	46

Note. Each indicator represents the highest-frequency observation within its respective domain. These teacher observations do not constitute clinical diagnoses.
Teachers' Perceptions and Perceived Educational Impact

As shown in Table 3, teachers reported an overall positive perception of supporting learners with suspected developmental concerns ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.81$). The perceived educational impact of these concerns was rated very high ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.83$). The highest-rated perception item indicated that additional resources or training would help teachers better support learners with developmental concerns ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.71$). The highest-rated perceived-impact item indicated that early identification would improve students' academic performance ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.64$).

These findings indicate that respondents recognized the educational relevance of developmental concerns while simultaneously identifying limitations in available professional and instructional resources. The pattern is consistent with evidence emphasizing teacher preparation and institutional support as important components of inclusive education (Hirata & Ozawa, 2023; Coker et al., 2024). Importantly, however, teachers' positive perceptions should not be interpreted as evidence that they possess sufficient expertise to independently diagnose developmental conditions. Rather, the findings support strengthening their capacity to observe, document, support, and appropriately refer learners who demonstrate persistent concerns.

Table 3
Teachers' Perceptions and Perceived Educational Impact

Construct	Aggregate Mean	SD	Interpretation
Teachers' Perceptions	4.05	0.81	Positive
Perceived Educational Impact	4.27	0.83	Very High

Construct	Highest-Rated Indicator	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Teachers' Perceptions	Additional resources or training would help me better support students with developmental concerns.	4.52	0.71	Very Positive
Perceived Educational Impact	Early identification would improve students' academic performance.	4.58	0.64	Very High

Relationship Between Teachers' Perceptions and Perceived Educational Impact

Table 4 shows a statistically significant positive association between teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact, $r = .419$, $p = .001$. The magnitude of the correlation indicates a modest positive relationship: teachers reporting more positive perceptions also tended to report greater perceived educational impact.

The relationship does not establish that teacher perceptions cause changes in educational impact. Rather, it indicates that the two constructs were associated within the participating sample. The corresponding coefficient of determination ($r^2 = .176$) indicates that approximately 17.6% of the variance was shared between the two measures.

This finding is compatible with research emphasizing the role of teacher knowledge and preparedness in recognizing and responding to developmental concerns (Hirata & Ozawa, 2023). At the same time, the modest magnitude of the relationship suggests that teachers' perceptions represent only one component of a broader support system. Institutional resources, professional development, class conditions, specialist access, family collaboration, and referral mechanisms may also shape how developmental concerns are recognized and addressed.

Table 4
Relationship Between Teachers' Perceptions and Perceived Educational Impact

Variables	r	p	Interpretation
Teachers' Perceptions × Perceived Educational Impact	.419	.001	Positive, statistically significant association

Note. $p < .05$. The association does not establish causation. A 95% confidence interval should be reported if available from the original statistical output.

Table 5 presents the instructional strategies reported by teachers. Individualized instruction was the most frequently reported strategy ($f = 56$), followed by peer support or buddy systems ($f = 52$), classroom seating adjustments ($f = 50$), additional time for tasks ($f = 48$), modified assignments or assessments ($f = 45$), positive reinforcement ($f = 43$), referral to specialists ($f = 35$), and frequent teacher check-ins ($f = 35$). The reported strategies indicate that teachers were already implementing classroom-level adaptations in response to learner variability. Individualized instruction, peer support, flexible classroom arrangements, additional time, and modified assessments are consistent with inclusive approaches that seek to reduce barriers to participation and learning (Rao et al., 2014; Danniels & Pyle, 2023). Teachers nevertheless identified substantial institutional needs. Additional training was the most frequently reported need ($f = 60$), followed by parent workshops and support programs ($f = 55$), educational materials ($f = 52$), smaller class sizes ($f = 49$), access to special education professionals ($f = 48$), collaboration with specialists ($f = 37$), and classroom aides ($f = 35$).

The combination of classroom adaptation and requests for institutional support indicates that teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices is influenced by the resources and professional networks available to them. Family collaboration is particularly relevant because educational planning may benefit from information concerning learners' developmental and educational experiences across settings (Washington-Nortey et al., 2025). Accordingly, strengthening inclusive education requires coordinated school, family, and professional support rather than relying solely on individual teachers.

Table 5
Instructional Strategies and Institutional Support Needs Identified by Teachers
A. Instructional Strategies

Strategy	Frequency	Rank
Individualized instruction	56	1
Peer support/Buddy system	52	2
Classroom seating adjustments	50	3
Additional time for tasks	48	4
Modified assignments/assessments	45	5
Positive reinforcement	43	6
Referral to specialists	35	7.5
Frequent teacher check-ins	35	7.5

B. Institutional Support and Resources Needed

Support Needed	Frequency	Rank
Additional training on developmental concerns	60	1
Parent workshops and support programs	55	2
Educational materials for developmental concerns	52	3
Smaller class sizes	49	4
Access to SPED professionals	48	5
Collaboration with specialists	37	6
Classroom aides	35	7

Implications for Inclusive Educational Practice

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined teachers' observations of suspected developmental concerns among public elementary school learners, their perceptions of these concerns, perceived educational impact, instructional responses, and institutional

support needs. Teachers reported concerns across literacy and language, mathematics and numeracy, memory and retention, attention and focus, problem-solving, executive functioning, social-emotional development, and study and academic skills, indicating diverse classroom patterns that may warrant additional educational support or referral for further assessment. Teachers expressed positive perceptions toward supporting learners with suspected developmental concerns, while the perceived educational impact was rated very high. A statistically significant positive association was also identified between teachers' perceptions and perceived educational impact; however, because the study employed a cross-sectional correlational design, this association should not be interpreted as causal. The study contributes context-specific evidence from a Philippine public elementary school by highlighting teacher-observed developmental concerns and the resources required to strengthen inclusive classroom practice. The findings support the strengthening of teacher professional development, systematic observation and referral procedures, family-school collaboration, and access to appropriate instructional and specialist resources. Importantly, teacher observations should form part of a broader identification and support process rather than substitute for formal multidisciplinary assessment.

School administrators should strengthen continuing professional development focused on recognizing classroom indicators of developmental concerns, documenting observations, implementing differentiated instructional support, communicating concerns to families, and following appropriate referral procedures, with clear emphasis that teachers identify educational concerns but do not independently establish clinical diagnoses. Schools should establish structured procedures for documenting developmental and learning concerns and referring learners for appropriate assessment, with clearly defined roles for teachers, administrators, parents, special education personnel, guidance personnel, and relevant health or developmental professionals. Collaboration with specialists should be strengthened to assist teachers in interpreting classroom observations and planning appropriate educational interventions, while parent education and family-support activities should be incorporated into inclusive education initiatives. Educational institutions should also provide appropriate instructional materials and resources for differentiated and flexible teaching and, where feasible, consider organizational measures such as class-size management and classroom assistance. Future studies should include multiple schools and diverse geographic and educational contexts, use longitudinal designs to examine changes associated with professional development and referral systems, and incorporate perspectives from parents, administrators, special education personnel, psychologists, developmental pediatricians, and other relevant stakeholders. Where ethically and practically feasible, future research should combine teacher observations with independent developmental or educational assessment data to distinguish classroom indicators from formally established developmental conditions.

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