

## DEVELOPING EARLY LEARNING PRACTICES: PRIMARY GRADE SCHOOL TEACHERS EXPLORATION

Sheila Mae L. Alivo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Researcher, The Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc.

### ABSTRACT

Developing early learning practices involves purposely designing and implementing educational methods and strategies, tailored to the needs of young children to support their holistic development. Crafting early learning practices often involved the integration of research-based strategies, cultural considerations and application of educational principles to meet educational needs of children in their formative years (Sarceda, 2005). This study was conducted among primary grade school teachers at Matanao I District, Division of Davao del Sur. In analyzing the data gathered in the study, the researcher utilized the qualitative phenomenological method using thematic analysis, and open-ended questions in the conduct of interviews and at the same time, encouraged respondent-teachers to present their own definition or meaning of the phenomenon being explored. The findings of the research are categorized into three (3) areas namely experiences, coping mechanisms and educational management insights. Under experiences, three (3) common scenarios emerged namely fostering the development of social skills, creation of an inclusive classroom and emphasis on early literacy. On the other hand, for coping mechanisms, the participants coped with building resilience, maintaining an open communication with parents and through continuous learning. As to educational management insights, it includes impact of classroom environment, parental involvement matters and early literacy fundamental.

**Keywords:** Early Learning practices, experiences, coping mechanism, insights, primary grade school teachers, open communication, continuous learning, social skills, inclusive classroom, resilience, literacy.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Developing early learning practices was both an art and science which laid at the heart of every child's educational foundation. It represented the delicate process of introducing these young minds to the world of knowledge, nurturing their curiosity, and providing them the tools, which they need to navigate the path of lifelong learning. Early childhood educators and parents alike played a pivotal role in sculpting these practices, as they were entrusted with the responsibility of creating an environment where children can thrive and develop essential skills.

A collection of research and study revealed that primary grade school teachers in five (5) countries like United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), Japan, Turkey and India used different approaches in creating early learning opportunities for their students. For the primary school teachers in UK ( Department For Education and Skills, 2005) , they used initiatives like "Sure Start" in which inclusivity and play-based learning have become key priorities, emphasizing child-centered and inclusive pedagogy (Ministry of Education and Culture 2016). In USA, assessment and accountability measures ensure quality of program such as "Early Childhood Longitudinal Study" which tracks child development in various educational setting.

On the other hand, in Turkey, Turkish educational system placed a strong emphasis on foundational skills and the importance of early childhood education (Turkish Ministry of National Education,2020) by employing active learning methods, including project-based and interactive activities to engage young learners. Moreover, teachers were encouraged to create inclusive classrooms to accommodate the diverse needs of students (Kara, 2013). In India, there is strong focus on foundational skills including literacy and numeracy as primary school teachers are often resourceful in designing creative and context-relevant teaching techniques (Chavan, 2016). They frequently used storytelling, hands-on activities and group projects to engage young learners.

In the Philippine setting, primary school teachers had made significant contributions to the development of early learning practices through combination of cultural values, educational policies and innovative teaching strategies. Filipino educators' embraced child-centered and active learning approaches, focusing on fostering students' critical thinking and creativity (Department of Education, 2019) by employing different methods such as storytelling, interactive activities and group discussions to engage young learners and make learning enjoyable (Sarceda, 2005).

Locally, in the schools of Matanao I District, Division of Davao del Sur, where the study was conducted, primary school teachers encountered a variety of experiences in developing early learning practices. It was in this context that this study was conceptualized to collect such experiences of the participants, as well as knowing their coping mechanisms and insights derived from it.

In creating early learning practices, experiences are given much weigh which are categorized into three (3) factors such as fostered the development of social skills, created inclusive classroom and emphasized early literacy,

Fostered the development of social skills. Educators recognized the key role that social interactions play in children's growth, both academically and personally. Teachers aimed to develop a supportive classroom environment where students can build essential social skills, including communication, cooperation, and emotional regulation. To achieve this, teachers often integrate structured activities and opportunities for peer interaction (Elias, 2014). Furthermore, teachers guide their students in developing empathy and respect for one another, nurturing a sense of belonging and community within the classroom and at the same time include conflict resolution skills where teachers help young children resolve their conflicts peacefully. Moreover, primary grade teachers engage in cooperative learning strategies, allowing students to collaborate with their peers on projects and activities. These experiences not only enhance social skills but also promote teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

Created inclusive classroom. To create an inclusive classroom, primary grade teachers often work collaboratively with specialists, support staff, and parents. They engage in open communication and partnership to ensure that each student's unique needs are met. In addition, they emphasize a flexible curriculum that can be adapted to cater to individual learning styles and preferences (Tomlinson, 2017). Another vital aspect of this experience involved promoting positive interactions among students. Teachers actively teach pro-social behaviors and conflict resolution skills to ensure a respectful and harmonious learning environment (Elias, 2014). Encouraging peer support and friendship-building activities can contribute to building a cohesive classroom community.

Emphasized Early Literacy. Early literacy encompasses a child's developing skills in reading and writing, is crucial for academic success and lifelong learning. Primary grade teachers are tasked with creating an environment that nurtures these skills and ignites a lifelong passion for reading and writing. This experience is pivotal for a child's educational journey and personal development (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Teachers recognized the significance of establishing a print-rich classroom. This involves displaying labels, books, and visual aids that immerse students in the world of written language. Such an environment piques children's curiosity and prompts exploration of letters and words, contributing to their emergent literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Read-aloud sessions were a cherished part of this experience where primary grade teachers read engaging stories to their students, exposing them to rich and diverse literature. These sessions expand students' vocabulary, stimulate their imaginations, and cultivate a deep love for stories and narratives. Through read-alouds, teachers not only model fluent reading but also establish reading as a pleasurable activity (Barkley & Trammel, 2008). In developing early learning practices, teachers also focus on phonics and phonemic awareness. These are fundamental skills that help children understand the relationship between sounds and letters, enabling them to decode words and become fluent readers.

Coping Mechanisms. Coping with the multifaceted challenges that arise in developing early learning practices is a central and dynamic facet of a primary grade school teacher's role. In the early education landscape, teachers encounter a diverse range of challenges, from addressing individual learning differences and behavior management to curriculum design and the demand for continuous adaptation. These dedicated educators employed a host of coping mechanisms to navigate these challenges, often drawing on their expertise, creativity, and unwavering commitment to the well-being and academic success of their young students. This exploration offers insight into the coping strategies and experiences of primary grade teachers, highlighting their resilience, adaptability, and relentless pursuit of providing a strong educational foundation for the children under their care.

Building resilience. Resilience, in this context, refers to the ability to withstand setbacks, adapt to changing circumstances, and bounce back from difficulties. The demands of primary education can be daunting, from diverse learning needs to behavior management and adapting to new educational approaches. Therefore, teachers actively develop their resilience to navigate these challenges effectively. They focus on maintaining a positive outlook and a growth mindset, understanding that challenges are opportunities for growth and learning. This attitude allows them to persevere in the face of difficulties (Dweck, 2006). Additionally, they engaged in self-reflection and self-regulation. They take the time to assess their own emotions and reactions to challenging situations, allowing them to manage stress and anxiety effectively (Seligman, 2011). Self-regulation techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, and time management help teachers stay grounded and focused, even when facing complex classroom situations (Santrock, 2017). Maintaining an open communication with the parents. Effective parent-teacher communication not only enhances the educational experience of students but also equips teachers with valuable support and resources to address challenges (Epstein, 2018). This mechanism fostered a sense of collaboration and partnership. By sharing information about students' progress, behavior, and challenges, teachers and parents can work together to develop strategies that promote positive outcomes for the child. Regular parent-teacher conferences, meetings, and newsletters provide opportunities for this essential interaction. Furthermore, open communication allows teachers to gain insights into their students' backgrounds, family dynamics, and cultural contexts, which are pivotal in addressing challenges effectively (Banks, 2015).

Continuous learning. In the ever-evolving landscape of education, teachers are confronted with a dynamic and diverse student body, along with new pedagogical approaches and educational requirements. To cope effectively, teachers engage in ongoing professional development and lifelong learning, keeping their skills and knowledge up-to-date (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Teachers often participate in workshops, courses, and training sessions, which provide opportunities to acquire new skills, gain insights into innovative teaching strategies, and stay informed about the latest educational research. Continuous learning ensures that teachers remain adaptable and capable of addressing a wide range of challenges in the classroom (Harris & Jones, 2010). Moreover, teachers embrace a growth mindset, recognizing that challenges are opportunities for growth and development (Dweck, 2006). They encourage self-reflection and self-assessment as part of their professional journey.

The insights gained from the experiences of primary grade school teachers in developing early learning practices are invaluable and provide a profound understanding of the challenges and successes within the realm of early childhood education. By exploring these experiences, we can uncover a wealth of knowledge that not only informs educational practice but also

highlights the resilience, creativity, and unwavering commitment of teachers in providing young students with a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

**The Impact of Classroom Environment.** Teachers understand that the physical and emotional atmosphere of the classroom plays a pivotal role in shaping young learners' experiences and development. Creating a classroom that is conducive to learning fosters a love for education and early literacy. Teachers recognize the significance of a print-rich environment in stimulating early literacy development, where labels, books, and visual aids immerse students in the world of written language (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Moreover, teachers understand that an engaging and organized classroom environment provides young learners with a sense of structure and predictability. This allows them to feel safe and confident, promoting optimal learning outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978). The physical layout, materials, and resources are carefully chosen to cater to the developmental needs of students, ensuring accessibility and promoting active exploration.

**Parental involvement matters.** Parental involvement is a crucial insight gained by primary grade school teachers when crafting early learning practices. These educators recognize that parents play an instrumental role in a child's educational journey and development. They understand that establishing a strong partnership with parents is not only beneficial but essential for the academic and social growth of young learners. This insight is supported by research that underscores the significant impact of parental involvement on student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Teachers value open communication and collaboration with parents, as it creates a support network that extends beyond the classroom. Engaged parents are more likely to be active participants in their child's learning process, reinforcing what is taught in school at home (Epstein, 2018). This collaboration ensures that children receive consistent messages about the importance of education and learning.

**Early literacy is fundamental.** Research has consistently highlighted the importance of early literacy development, as it is strongly linked to reading comprehension and academic achievement (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Teachers appreciated the significance of exposing young learners to a print-rich environment, where labels, books, and visual aids are readily available. This immersion in written language sparks children's curiosity and motivation to explore literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Moreover, teachers acknowledged the role of oral language development in early literacy. They actively engage students in conversations, encouraging them to express themselves and interact with peers and adults. This supports vocabulary development, which is a strong predictor of reading success (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Teachers also recognized that early literacy is not confined to the classroom. They actively involve parents in early literacy activities, encouraging them to read with their children at home and provide a literacy-rich environment. This collaboration extended the learning experience beyond the school and reinforces the importance of early literacy (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005).

This study is anchored on various theories namely Social Cognitive Theory developed by Albert Bandura in the 1960, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Cognitive-Constructivist Theory by Jean Piaget (1952). Primarily, this study is anchored on Social Cognitive Theory which emphasizes the role of observational learning, where individuals acquire new behaviors and knowledge through observing and imitating others. In the context of primary grade school teachers crafting early learning practices, this theory suggests that teachers learn and adapt their teaching strategies based on observing their colleagues, mentors, and students. Bandura's theory also highlights the role of self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's ability to perform specific tasks. In the context of crafting early learning practices, self-efficacy can influence teachers' confidence in their teaching methods and their ability to adapt to new challenges and strategies. Teachers with higher self-efficacy are more likely to explore and adopt innovative practices to enhance early learning.

Presented in Figure 1 is the relationship of the variables in the study. Based on the figure, there are three interconnected variables. These variables are the (1) experiences of primary grade school teachers in developing early learning practices; (2) coping mechanisms of primary grade school teachers on the challenges in developing early learning practices; and (3) Educational insights drawn from the experiences of the informants.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach specifically a phenomenological research design for which interviews provide in-depth method that can grant access to deep knowledge and explanations and help grasp the subjects' perspective.

The respondents of the study were the primary grade school teachers in Matanao I District-Division of Davao del Sur who were assigned to pseudonyms to conceal their identity. The instruments which were used in the study were participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. The researcher utilized purposive sampling design in selecting the respondent -teachers. The answers of the participants to the study were coded and analyzed to build and construct for the commonality and discreteness of responses. It was made sure that the responses of the participants were carefully coded to ensure the reliability of the result so as to uphold the authenticity of the responses.

## 3. RESULTS

The experiences of primary grade school teachers in developing early learning practices were at the forefront of educational innovation. This qualitative exploration delves into the multifaceted experiences of primary grade teachers, uncovering the methods, challenges, and inspirations that drive the crafting of early learning practices. By shedding light on these experiences, we aim to better understand the complexities of early education, offering valuable insights for the continued improvement of educational approaches for young learners.

The findings of the research are categorized into three (3) areas namely experiences, coping mechanisms and educational management insights. Under experiences, three (3) common scenarios emerged namely fostering the development of social skills, creation of an inclusive classroom and emphasis on early literacy. On the other hand, for coping mechanisms, the participants coped with building resilience, maintaining an open communication with parents and through continuous learning. As to educational management insights, it includes impact of classroom environment, parental involvement matters and early literacy fundamental.

## 4. DISCUSSIONS

In this study, experiences of primary grade school teachers in developing early learning practices were primarily influenced by three (3) factors such as fostering the development of social skills, creation of an inclusive classroom and emphasis on early literacy. In fostering development of social skills, teacher-respondents were able to create supportive classroom environment where students built essential social skills through communication, cooperation, and emotional regulation. These can be referred to as pro-social behaviors, highlighted by way of sharing and caring for others as well as employing conflict resolution skills to settle disagreements among learners at such a young age. On the other hand, the impact of creating an inclusive classroom by respondent-teachers ensure that every child, regardless of their unique characteristics, felt a sense of belongingness, thereby encouraging them to participate actively in school and classroom activities. Hence, as a result, it fosters a culture of acceptance and celebration of diversity among learners. In the aspect of emphasis on early literacy, respondent-teachers recognize the significance of establishing a print-rich classroom thereby creating an environment which pique children's curiosity and prompts exploration of letters and words. In addition, the use also of phonics and phonemic awareness as medium of teaching help children understand the relationship between sounds and letters, enabling them to decode words and become fluent readers.

In the aspect of coping mechanism, topping the list is the building of resilience. Building resilience was a vital coping mechanism which refers to the ability to withstand setbacks, adapt to changing circumstances, and bounce back from difficulties. Respondent-teachers revealed that they consider resiliency as not a fixed trait but rather a skill that can be cultivated and strengthened over time. By maintaining a positive outlook and a growth mindset, building resiliency means to persevere in the face of difficulties. Moreover, the use of self-regulation techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, and time management help teachers stay grounded and focused, even when facing complex classroom situations. Through these, professional development and continuous learning are also achieved. Next coping mechanism is maintaining an open communication with parents which is vital as it establishes a sense of collaboration and partnership. By sharing information about students' progress, behavior, and challenges, teachers and parents can work together to develop strategies that promote positive outcomes for the child. The respondent-teachers conduct of conferences, meetings, and newsletters provide opportunities for this essential interaction. This is also helpful in identifying early signs of difficulties and allows for timely interventions for learners facing academic challenges. On



the other hand, continuous learning as a coping mechanism provide respondent-teachers up-to-date skills and knowledge. This is made possible through participating in workshops, courses and training sessions which provide opportunities to acquire new skills, gain insights on innovative teaching strategies, and to stay informed about the latest educational research.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study recommends to Dep Ed officials and policy makers to come up with Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs which are tailored to promote professional growth initially intended for primary grade school educators such as incorporating updated play-based learning methodologies, understanding the impact of socio-emotional learning and acknowledging the role of differentiated instructions design for early learning settings. Taking into consideration these three factors would help facilitate early learning that aligns with the current curriculum standards imposed by Dep Ed. Moreover, it also recommended that additional funding be given to public schools for the purchase of books and other learning materials which promote literacy among primary grade school learners.

Furthermore, to ensure that collaboration and partnership of teachers and parents is sustained, it is recommended that regular meetings be conducted between teachers and parents either through face to face and/or online so as to be updated on the progress of learners at school.

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