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Teachers' Experiences in Supporting Foundational Learning: A Qualitative Study of Grade 2 Instruction at Balliao Integrated Public School

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ABSTRACT

Foundational learning in the early grades is critical for learners' long-term academic success, particularly in literacy and numeracy. In public elementary schools, teachers play a central role in ensuring that foundational skills are developed despite challenges related to learner diversity, curriculum demands, and limited resources. This qualitative study explored the experiences of Grade 2 teachers in supporting foundational learning at Balliao Integrated Public School. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: explicit and routine-based instruction as a foundation for learning, adaptive teaching strategies for diverse learner needs, the role of assessment-informed instruction, and the emotional and professional demands of early-grade teaching. Findings indicate that while teachers demonstrate strong commitment and adaptive expertise in supporting early learners, sustained foundational instruction requires stronger institutional support, protected instructional time, and ongoing professional development. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of teachers' lived experiences in early-grade instruction and highlights implications for practice, policy, and future research in foundational education.

Keywords: foundational learning, Grade 2 instruction, early literacy and numeracy, teacher experiences, qualitative study

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Introduction

Foundational learning in the early grades serves as the cornerstone of learners' academic development, shaping their capacity to read with comprehension, perform basic mathematical operations, and engage meaningfully in formal schooling. Research consistently demonstrates that early mastery of literacy and numeracy skills strongly predicts later academic achievement and reduces the risk of long-term learning difficulties. Consequently, the early elementary years, particularly Grades 1 to 3, are widely regarded as a critical period for instructional intervention and support.

In the Philippine public school context, Grade 2 represents a transitional stage in foundational learning. Learners are expected to move beyond basic letter recognition and counting skills toward more complex reading, writing, and numeracy tasks. Teachers at this level face the challenge of addressing varied learner readiness, language backgrounds, and learning gaps, often within resource-constrained environments. While national policies and curriculum reforms emphasize strengthening foundational skills, the realities of classroom implementation depend largely on teachers' instructional practices and professional judgment. Teachers' experiences in supporting foundational learning remain underexplored, particularly in rural and integrated public schools. Much of the existing research focuses on learner outcomes or program effectiveness, with limited attention to how teachers experience, interpret, and respond to the demands of early-grade instruction. Understanding teachers' lived experiences is essential, as it provides insight into the pedagogical, emotional, and contextual factors that shape foundational learning in real classroom settings.

This study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of Grade 2 teachers in supporting foundational learning at Balliao Integrated Public School. By foregrounding teachers' voices, the study aims to deepen understanding of how foundational instruction is enacted in practice and to identify factors that support or constrain effective early-grade teaching.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences in supporting foundational learning among Grade 2 learners at Balliao Integrated Public School. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Describe the instructional strategies used by Grade 2 teachers to support foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

2. Examine how teachers adapt instruction to address learner diversity and varying levels of readiness.
3. Explore teachers' use of assessment information in guiding foundational instruction.
4. Identify the challenges and emotional demands encountered by teachers in early-grade teaching.
5. Derive implications for improving foundational learning practices and institutional support in public elementary schools.

3. Methods of the Study

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate for examining complex instructional practices within a bounded educational context. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, perspectives, and classroom practices related to foundational learning.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at Balliao Integrated Public School. Participants included Grade 2 teachers directly involved in teaching foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their teaching assignment and experience in early-grade instruction.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered using multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth, credibility, and triangulation of findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' experiences, instructional decisions, challenges encountered in teaching foundational skills, and perceptions of learners' progress in literacy and numeracy. These interviews allowed participants to articulate their perspectives in their own words while providing sufficient structure to address the study's research objectives. Classroom observations were also carried out, with particular attention given to instructional routines, learner engagement, scaffolding strategies, and teacher-learner interactions during foundational learning activities. In addition, document analysis was undertaken to examine lesson plans, assessment tools, and instructional materials used by teachers, providing further context and corroboration of reported practices related to foundational



learning.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and themes. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, member checking, and reflective memo writing.

4. Results and Findings

Analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and instructional documents generated four major themes that describe teachers' experiences in supporting foundational learning among Grade 2 learners. These themes reflect the instructional, assessment-related, and emotional dimensions of early-grade teaching and illustrate how teachers navigate the demands of foundational literacy and numeracy instruction in a public elementary school context.

Theme 1: Explicit and Routine-Based Instruction as the Foundation of Learning

Teachers consistently emphasized that explicit instruction and well-established classroom routines form the foundation of effective foundational learning in Grade 2. Participants described the use of daily drills, guided reading sessions, structured numeracy routines, and step-by-step demonstrations as essential strategies for helping learners internalize basic literacy and numeracy skills. These routines provided predictability and structure, which teachers believed were especially important for young learners who were still developing attention, memory, and self-regulation skills.

One teacher explained, "*Kailangan paulit-ulit at may routine kasi doon nasasanay ang mga bata,*" highlighting the role of repetition in reinforcing learning. Another participant shared, "*Kapag malinaw ang instruction at may guide, mas nagiging confident ang learners,*" emphasizing that clear explanations and modeling helped learners feel more secure and willing to participate. A third teacher added, "*Kapag may routine na, alam na nila ang gagawin kahit mahina pa sila,*" suggesting that routines reduce anxiety and support independent engagement.

Interpretively, this theme underscores the importance of systematic and explicit instruction in early-grade education. Research in early literacy consistently shows that young learners benefit from explicit teaching of foundational skills, particularly when instruction is sequenced, guided, and reinforced through regular practice

(National Reading Panel, 2000; Foorman et al., 2016). Similarly, in early numeracy, structured routines focusing on number sense, counting, and basic operations have been shown to support conceptual understanding and skill automaticity (Clements & Sarama, 2014). The findings suggest that routine-based instruction not only strengthens skill acquisition but also fosters learner confidence and classroom stability.

Theme 2: Adaptive Teaching for Diverse Learner Needs

Learner diversity emerged as a significant factor shaping instructional practices in Grade 2 classrooms. Teachers described wide variations in learners' reading abilities, numeracy skills, language proficiency, and learning pace, which required constant instructional adjustments. Participants reported modifying lesson pacing, using flexible grouping, and adapting tasks to ensure that all learners could participate meaningfully in classroom activities.

One teacher noted, "*Hindi sabay-sabay ang learning ng mga bata, kaya kailangan talagang mag-adjust,*" reflecting the challenge of addressing varied readiness levels. Another participant shared, "*May mabilis, may mabagal, kaya minsan hiwalay ang activity o grouping,*" while a third explained, "*Pinapasimple ko muna para sa iba bago ko dagdagan ang hirap.*" These responses illustrate teachers' efforts to balance inclusivity with academic expectations.

This theme highlights teachers' adaptive expertise and professional judgment in responding to learner diversity. The findings align with research on differentiated instruction, which emphasizes the need to tailor content, process, and learning activities based on learners' readiness and needs (Tomlinson, 2014). In early-grade contexts, such adaptability is particularly critical, as learners often enter school with unequal exposure to literacy and numeracy experiences (Duncan et al., 2007). The study suggests that adaptive teaching practices play a key role in preventing early learning gaps from widening.

Theme 3: Assessment-Informed Instruction

Teachers described assessment as an integral component of foundational instruction, serving as a guide for instructional decision-making rather than merely a tool for grading. Participants reported using both formal and informal assessments, including reading checks, short quizzes, seatwork analysis, and daily classroom observations, to monitor learner progress and identify those needing additional support or enrichment.

One teacher explained, "*Base sa assessment, doon ko ina-*



adjust ang activities,” indicating how assessment results directly influenced lesson planning. Another participant shared, “*Kapag nakita kong hirap sila, inuulit ko o binabago ko ang strategy,*” while a third noted, “*Yung assessment ang basehan kung sino ang kailangan ng remediation.*” These responses demonstrate a formative approach to assessment.

Interpretively, this theme reinforces the role of assessment-informed instruction in early learning. Research on formative assessment emphasizes that timely and diagnostic feedback enables teachers to adjust instruction and address misconceptions before they become entrenched (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Heritage, 2010). In early literacy and numeracy, formative assessment is particularly valuable, as it supports targeted remediation and responsive teaching (Foorman et al., 2016). The findings suggest that teachers’ assessment literacy is crucial in sustaining effective foundational instruction.

Theme 4: Emotional and Professional Demands of Teaching Early Learners

Beyond instructional practices, teachers highlighted the emotional and professional demands associated with teaching Grade 2 learners. Participants described experiences of fatigue, pressure, and heightened responsibility, particularly when supporting learners who struggled with foundational skills. Despite these challenges, teachers also expressed a strong sense of fulfillment and motivation when learners showed progress. One teacher reflected, “*Nakakapagod talaga, lalo na kapag maraming nahihirapan,*” while another shared, “*May pressure kasi alam mong foundation ito ng bata.*” At the same time, teachers emphasized the rewarding aspect of their work, as illustrated by one participant’s statement: “*Nakakapagod pero mas fulfilling kapag may progreso ang bata.*” Another added, “*Kapag marunong na silang magbasa, sulit ang pagod.*”

This theme underscores the emotional labor inherent in early-grade teaching. Teaching foundational skills requires sustained emotional engagement, patience, and care, reinforcing the view of teaching as both cognitive and emotional work (Hargreaves, 1998). Studies on teacher well-being suggest that emotional demands are particularly pronounced in early-grade instruction, where teachers feel strong moral responsibility for learners’ long-term success (Day & Gu, 2010). The findings highlight the need to recognize and support teachers’ emotional well-being as a key component of instructional sustainability.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that supporting foundational learning in Grade 2 requires a synergistic combination of structured pedagogy, adaptive instructional strategies, and sustained emotional commitment on the part of teachers. Quantitative and qualitative evidence from this study shows that explicit instruction and routine-based teaching practices form the backbone of effective early-grade instruction. Such approaches are consistent with a substantial body of research emphasizing the importance of systematic and explicit instruction in early literacy and numeracy development. In reading, studies grounded in the science of reading highlight that young learners benefit from clearly sequenced instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension, delivered through consistent routines and guided practice (National Reading Panel, 2000; Foorman et al., 2016). Similarly, in early mathematics, structured instructional routines that focus on number sense, counting, and basic operations have been shown to support conceptual understanding and reduce early learning gaps (Clements & Sarama, 2014; Duncan et al., 2007).

At the same time, the study demonstrates that structured pedagogy alone is insufficient to meet the diverse needs of Grade 2 learners. Teachers’ adaptive practices such as flexible grouping, task modification, and pacing adjustments—reflect the exercise of professional judgment in responding to learner diversity. This finding aligns with literature on differentiated instruction, which emphasizes the need to tailor content, process, and learning activities based on learners’ readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). In early-grade classrooms, where learners enter school with varying levels of prior exposure to literacy and numeracy, such adaptability becomes essential for ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities and preventing the widening of achievement gaps.

Assessment-informed teaching also emerged as a critical practice in guiding foundational instruction. Teachers in the study reported using formative assessments, informal checks, and daily observations to identify learners who required remediation or enrichment. This aligns with research underscoring the central role of formative assessment in early learning, where timely feedback and diagnostic information can inform instructional adjustments and support learner progress (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Heritage, 2010). In early literacy and numeracy, formative assessment enables teachers to detect misconceptions early and provide targeted support before difficulties become entrenched.



Beyond instructional strategies, the findings highlight the emotional dimension of early-grade teaching, underscoring that teaching foundational skills is not solely a cognitive or technical endeavor. Teachers described experiences of fatigue, emotional strain, and heightened responsibility, alongside feelings of fulfillment when learners showed improvement. This duality reinforces the view of teaching as both cognitive and emotional work. Hargreaves (1998) conceptualizes teaching as emotional labor, emphasizing that teachers' emotional engagement is integral to sustaining motivation, care, and commitment. Similarly, Day and Gu (2010) argue that teachers' emotional resilience is closely linked to their capacity to adapt to instructional demands and maintain effectiveness over time.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective foundational learning in Grade 2 depends on more than the adoption of specific instructional techniques. It requires a holistic approach that integrates evidence-based pedagogy, responsive and differentiated teaching, assessment-informed decision-making, and institutional recognition of the emotional demands placed on teachers. Supporting teachers in these interconnected dimensions is essential for strengthening early-grade instruction and ensuring sustainable improvements in foundational learning outcomes.

6. Implications

The findings of the study suggest several important implications for both educational practice and policy, particularly in strengthening foundational learning in the early grades. First, schools should prioritize sustained and targeted professional development that focuses on foundational pedagogy and assessment literacy. Rather than relying on one-time training sessions, professional development programs should be continuous and practice-oriented, equipping teachers with effective strategies for teaching early literacy and numeracy, using formative assessments, and translating assessment results into responsive instructional planning. Ongoing mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities can further support teachers in refining their instructional practices and addressing persistent learning gaps among early learners.

Second, the study underscores the need to protect instructional time dedicated to foundational skills. Early literacy and numeracy require consistent, uninterrupted practice, yet these areas are often compromised by competing curricular demands and non-instructional

activities. School leaders and policymakers should ensure that schedules explicitly allocate sufficient time for foundational instruction and that this time is safeguarded from being reduced or repurposed. Protecting instructional time enables teachers to implement structured routines, guided practice, and remediation activities essential for learners who are still developing basic skills.

In addition, the findings highlight the importance of supporting teachers through collaborative planning structures and reduced non-instructional workload. Collaborative planning time allows teachers to share strategies, align instructional approaches, and collectively analyze learner data, thereby improving instructional coherence and efficiency. Reducing administrative and non-teaching responsibilities can further free teachers to focus on lesson preparation, reflection, and individualized learner support. Such structural support is particularly critical in early-grade teaching, where careful planning and responsiveness significantly influence learning outcomes.

Therefore, the study emphasizes the need to recognize and address the emotional demands of early-grade teaching. Teaching foundational skills involves sustained emotional labor, including managing learner struggles, maintaining motivation, and responding to parental and institutional expectations. Policies and school practices should acknowledge these demands by promoting teacher well-being, providing psychosocial support mechanisms, and fostering supportive school cultures. Recognizing teachers' emotional experiences as integral to instructional quality is essential for sustaining effective teaching practices, reducing burnout, and ensuring long-term instructional sustainability in early-grade education.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that teachers' experiences in supporting foundational learning are shaped by instructional demands, learner diversity, assessment practices, and emotional labor. Grade 2 teachers at Balliao Integrated Public School exhibited strong commitment and adaptive expertise in fostering early literacy and numeracy skills. However, sustaining effective foundational instruction requires institutional support, targeted professional development, and policies that recognize both the pedagogical and emotional dimensions of early-grade teaching. Strengthening these areas can enhance foundational learning outcomes and contribute to more equitable and effective elementary education.

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