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Teaching Beginning Readers: A Phenomenological Exploration of Teachers' Experiences in Developing Reading Skills Among Grade 1 Learners

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ABSTRACT

Developing foundational reading skills during the early grades is essential to learners' later academic success, yet teaching beginning readers remains a complex task because Grade 1 learners differ in language exposure, phonological awareness, vocabulary, decoding ability, comprehension, learning pace, and home literacy support. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers in developing the reading skills of beginning readers in the District of Asipulo. The study focused on teachers' experiences, challenges, instructional practices, adaptive strategies, and perceptions of the factors that support or hinder early reading development. Participants were purposively selected Grade 1 teachers from elementary schools within the district who had direct experience teaching Reading and Literacy or related language learning areas. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed phenomenologically through significant statements, coding, clustering of meanings, thematic development, and synthesis of the essence of participants' experiences. Teachers reported positive experiences when learners gradually recognized sounds, blended words, read independently, and developed confidence, while negative experiences included limited vocabulary, inconsistent attendance, difficulty retaining previously learned skills, varying home support, and substantial instructional demands. The findings underscore the importance of systematic foundational literacy instruction, differentiated teaching, meaningful reading materials, family involvement, continuous formative assessment, and sustained professional support for Grade 1 teachers.

Keywords: beginning readers, foundational literacy, reading skills, Grade 1, phenomenology, reading instruction, Asipulo District.

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1. Introduction

Foundational literacy remains one of the most pressing concerns in basic education because the ability to read and understand text serves as a foundation for learning in mathematics, science, social studies, and other academic areas. Despite expanded access to schooling, many children continue to experience serious difficulties in acquiring basic reading competencies. The World Bank reported that approximately 70% of 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand an age-appropriate text, a condition described as learning poverty. This situation underscores the need to strengthen reading instruction during the earliest years of schooling, when children develop essential competencies in oral language, phonological awareness, letter–sound relationships, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

The continuing learning crisis has encouraged education systems to place greater emphasis on foundational learning and evidence-based early reading instruction. International organizations emphasize that early literacy is not developed through word recognition alone but through systematic opportunities for children to connect spoken language, sounds, print, vocabulary, and meaning. Recent global evidence also indicates that children who fail to establish foundational reading skills during the first years of schooling may experience increasing difficulty as academic texts become more complex in later grades. The World Bank has therefore emphasized the importance of strengthening early-grade reading practices and supporting teachers with appropriate instructional approaches and materials. These international concerns highlight the critical role of teachers in identifying reading difficulties early, providing differentiated support, and creating meaningful opportunities for children to practice reading.

The Philippines continues to face substantial challenges in reading achievement. Results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 showed that Filipino learners performed below the OECD average in reading, with only 24% of 15-year-old students attaining Level 2 or higher in reading, compared with an OECD average of 74%. The Philippine mean reading score increased from 340 in 2018 to 347 in 2022, but the difference was not statistically significant, indicating that substantial challenges in reading proficiency remain. Although PISA assesses 15-year-old learners rather than beginning readers, these results reinforce the importance of developing strong literacy foundations during the primary grades. Difficulties that remain unresolved in the early years may affect children's ability to comprehend increasingly complex texts as they advance through school.

In response to the need to strengthen foundational competencies, the Philippine Department of Education introduced the MATATAG Curriculum, which began phased implementation in School Year 2024–2025. For Grade 1, the curriculum includes dedicated learning areas in Language and Reading and Literacy, reflecting the importance placed on the systematic development of early language and reading competencies. Grade 1 teachers therefore occupy a crucial position in helping children transition from emergent literacy toward increasingly independent reading. They are expected to address differences in learners' readiness while developing foundational skills such as sound recognition, decoding, vocabulary, oral language, fluency, and comprehension. This responsibility requires teachers to make continuous decisions regarding pacing, instructional materials, remediation, reinforcement, assessment, and differentiation.

At the local level, the challenge of developing beginning readers is particularly relevant in the District of Asipulo, where Grade 1 teachers work with learners from different school and community contexts. The district includes Ammoweg Elementary School, Antipolo Elementary School, Asipulo Central School, ACS Annex, Bukig Elementary School, Camandag Elementary School, Cawayan Elementary School, Duli Elementary School, Haliap Elementary School, Lab-ong Elementary School, Liwon Elementary School, Maloy Elementary School, Namal Elementary School, Nangkatengey Elementary School, Numpaling Elementary School, Nungawa Primary School, Olehwagon Elementary School, Panubtuban Elementary School, Pula Elementary School, Pulpog Primary School, and Tadyokong Elementary School. Within these

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schools, learners may enter Grade 1 with differing levels of exposure to books, oral language experiences, preschool preparation, home reading practices, vocabulary, and family support. These differences can influence how quickly children develop foundational reading skills and may require teachers to provide individualized or differentiated instruction.

The experiences of Grade 1 teachers in Asipulo are therefore important because they provide insights that cannot be captured solely through reading assessment scores. Quantitative measures can identify whether children meet expected reading levels, but they may not fully explain how teachers respond when learners struggle to recognize letters, blend sounds, understand vocabulary, retain previously taught skills, or read with comprehension. Similarly, test scores do not adequately describe the patience, instructional adjustments, remediation efforts, family communication, and professional fulfillment involved when a struggling learner gradually becomes an independent reader. Examining these experiences can provide a more contextualized understanding of early reading instruction in the district.

Despite the established importance of foundational literacy, there remains a need to understand how teachers themselves experience the process of developing beginning readers, particularly within specific local school contexts. Much of the existing evidence emphasizes learner achievement, proficiency levels, or interventions, while less attention is given to the meanings teachers attach to their everyday experiences of addressing varied reading abilities. A phenomenological inquiry is therefore appropriate because it allows the study to capture teachers' struggles, adaptations, instructional decisions, breakthroughs, and perceptions of the support needed to develop Grade 1 learners' reading skills.

The study seeks to explore how Grade 1 teachers experience and make meaning of teaching children to read. Specifically, it examines the reading difficulties they encounter, the strategies and adaptations they employ, the positive and negative dimensions of beginning reading instruction, and the forms of school and family support they consider important. By giving voice to teachers' lived experiences, the study seeks to generate context-sensitive insights that may contribute to improving early literacy practices, teacher support, reading interventions, and foundational learning initiatives within the District of Asipulo and comparable elementary school settings.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Grade 1 teachers describe their lived experiences in teaching beginning readers?
2. What reading difficulties do teachers commonly encounter among Grade 1 learners?
3. What instructional practices do teachers use to develop foundational reading skills?
4. How do teachers adapt instruction to learners with different levels of reading readiness?
5. What positive and negative experiences characterize the teaching of beginning readers?
6. What forms of school and family support do teachers perceive as necessary for strengthening early literacy?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Foundational Reading Skills

Beginning reading is a developmental process involving several interconnected competencies. Learners need to develop awareness of spoken sounds, recognize relationships between letters and sounds, blend sounds into words, acquire vocabulary, improve reading fluency, and understand the meaning of what they read. Weakness in one foundational area may influence progress in another.

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Phonological awareness is especially important during early literacy development because learners must recognize that spoken language consists of smaller sound units. Phonics instruction then helps children understand relationships between written symbols and sounds. As decoding becomes increasingly automatic, learners can devote greater cognitive attention to comprehension.
However, reading development is not purely mechanical. Children also require meaningful interaction with language, stories, pictures, conversations, and familiar experiences. Effective beginning reading instruction therefore combines systematic skill development with meaningful literacy experiences.

2.2 Learner Diversity in Beginning Reading
Grade 1 classrooms are characterized by substantial differences in reading readiness. Some learners enter formal schooling already familiar with letters, sounds, books, and simple words, while others have limited exposure to print.
Differences may be associated with preschool experience, home literacy practices, language background, access to books, attendance, confidence, and individual developmental pace. Consequently, a single uniform reading activity may not adequately address the needs of all learners.
Teachers are therefore challenged to provide differentiated opportunities while continuing to meet curriculum expectations.

2.3 Differentiated Reading Instruction
Differentiated instruction recognizes that learners require varying levels of support. Beginning readers who struggle with letter recognition may require different activities from those already capable of reading simple sentences.
Teachers may differentiate through flexible grouping, individualized exercises, repeated practice, peer-assisted learning, guided reading, visual materials, games, storytelling, and targeted remediation.
Regular formative assessment is also important because it allows teachers to identify specific reading difficulties rather than labeling a child simply as a "poor reader."

2.4 Contextualized Literacy Instruction
Young learners often engage more successfully when reading materials are understandable and connected to their experiences. Familiar objects, local situations, family experiences, community practices, and commonly used vocabulary can help learners connect spoken language with written text.
Contextualization can therefore make literacy instruction more meaningful while gradually introducing learners to increasingly complex language.

2.5 Family and School Support
Early literacy development extends beyond the classroom. Opportunities to practice reading at home can reinforce skills introduced in school. However, not all families have equal time, confidence, educational background, or access to reading materials to support children consistently.
This makes home–school partnership valuable but also potentially uneven. Teachers may need to provide families with simple, achievable ways to support reading rather than assuming that parents can independently provide formal reading instruction.

3. Methodology
The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 1 teachers in developing reading skills among beginning readers in the District of Asipulo. Phenomenology was appropriate because the inquiry aimed to understand how teachers experienced, interpreted, and gave meaning to the everyday process of teaching children to recognize sounds and letters, decode words, develop fluency, acquire vocabulary, and comprehend simple texts. Participants were

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purposively selected Grade 1 teachers from schools within the district who had direct experience teaching Reading and Literacy, Language, or related learning areas and who voluntarily consented to participate. The District of Asipulo included Ammoweg Elementary School, Antipolo Elementary School, Asipulo Central School, ACS Annex, Bukig Elementary School, Camandag Elementary School, Cawayan Elementary School, Duli Elementary School, Haliap Elementary School, Lab-ong Elementary School, Liwon Elementary School, Maloy Elementary School, Namal Elementary School, Nangkatengey Elementary School, Numpaling Elementary School, Nungawa Primary School, Olehwagon Elementary School, Panubtuban Elementary School, Pula Elementary School, Pulpog Primary School, and Tadyokong Elementary School. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews that explored learners' reading difficulties, teachers' instructional strategies, differentiated interventions, assessment practices, experiences with family support, challenges in sustaining reading progress, and meaningful experiences of learner improvement. Follow-up questions allowed participants to elaborate on significant experiences. Data analysis involved transcription and repeated reading of interview responses, identification of significant statements, horizontalization of relevant experiences, development of initial codes, clustering of related meanings, formulation of themes, preparation of textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer examination, audit trail documentation, rich description, and researcher reflexivity. Ethical principles included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the use of participant codes rather than personal names when presenting findings.

4. Findings

Theme 1: Beginning Reading as a Journey of Uneven Readiness

Teachers described Grade 1 reading instruction as beginning from markedly different learner starting points. Some children entered the classroom able to recognize letters and read simple words, whereas others had difficulty connecting letters with sounds.

Positive Experiences

Teachers regarded existing literacy knowledge as an important foundation for accelerating reading development.

P2 shared: "Some pupils already know the alphabet and can read short words, so when we introduce new sounds, they easily connect them with what they already know."

Teachers also appreciated discovering individual strengths.

P5 stated: "Even if a child cannot read a sentence yet, sometimes the learner already knows many sounds. We start from what the child can do."

Negative Experiences

The wide differences in readiness created instructional challenges.

P1 explained: "In one class, some can already read while others are still learning the letters. It is difficult to use exactly the same activity for everyone."

P4 added: "You cannot rush the child who is still confused with letters just because the other pupils are already reading words."

The theme demonstrates that beginning reading does not follow a uniform pathway. Teachers must identify each learner's existing competencies and provide instruction appropriate to individual readiness.

Theme 2: Building Literacy From Sounds to Meaningful Words

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of gradually moving learners from sounds and letters toward words, sentences, and meaningful reading.

Positive Experiences

Teachers experienced satisfaction when learners began to combine individual skills.

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P3 recalled: "At first, the pupil only knew the sound. Later, the child could blend the sounds and suddenly read the whole word. That moment is very fulfilling."
Another participant explained:
"When they understand that the sounds they are saying can form a word, they become excited to read more." - **P6**

Negative Experiences

Some learners experienced difficulty blending sounds even after recognizing letters.
P2 stated: "There are pupils who can name every letter but still cannot combine the sounds into a word. That is where we need more practice."
Another challenge involved decoding without understanding.
P7 explained: "Sometimes they can pronounce the word, but when I ask what it means, they cannot explain it."
The findings indicate that reading instruction should not end with letter recognition or oral decoding. Learners need coordinated development of phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

Theme 3: Repetition and Differentiated Support as Foundations of Progress

Repetition emerged as an essential component of beginning reading instruction.

Positive Experiences

Teachers reported that repeated exposure gradually strengthened recognition and confidence.
P1 stated: "We repeat the sounds and words many times. At first they need help, but later they can read them without me."
Differentiated activities were also used.
P5 explained: "I give easier words to the children who are still beginning, while those who can already read receive short sentences or stories."

Negative Experiences

Teachers noted that some learners quickly forgot previously introduced skills.
P3 stated: "Today the child can identify the letter, but tomorrow we sometimes have to teach it again."
The need for individualized support also increased demands on teachers.
P8 explained: "You want to sit beside every struggling reader, but you also have the rest of the class waiting for you."
Repetition is necessary for consolidating foundational skills, but repetition alone is insufficient. Teachers need to adjust task complexity and provide targeted support based on learners' specific difficulties.

Theme 4: Contextualized and Engaging Activities as Gateways to Participation

Teachers found that beginning readers were more responsive when reading instruction involved familiar, enjoyable, and interactive activities.

Positive Experiences

Participants used pictures, songs, games, storytelling, flashcards, objects, and familiar words.
P4 explained: "When I show a picture and ask them what it is before showing the word, they become excited because they already know the object."
P6 added: "Games make them forget that they are afraid of reading. They participate because they think they are playing."
Stories were also viewed as useful for developing vocabulary and comprehension.

Negative Experiences

Teachers observed declining attention when activities were repetitive without variation.
P2 stated: "If we only keep reading from the same type of material, some pupils lose interest."
Unfamiliar vocabulary could also create barriers.

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P7 explained: "Sometimes the word is difficult because the child does not know what it means. Before they can read with understanding, we first need to explain the word."
Engagement and literacy development are closely connected. Contextualized materials can reduce the distance between children's oral experiences and printed language, while varied activities can maintain motivation.

Theme 5: Home–School Support as Both a Strength and a Challenge
Participants repeatedly referred to the influence of reading practice outside school.
Positive Experiences
Teachers noticed faster progress among learners who received consistent practice and encouragement at home.
P3 stated: "When parents practice the reading materials that we send home, you can see the improvement because the child comes back more confident."
P5 added: "Parents do not have to teach complicated lessons. Even ten or fifteen minutes of reading with the child helps."
Negative Experiences
Home support was inconsistent.
P1 explained:
"Some children return the next day having practiced, while others have not opened the reading material."
Teachers recognized that this was not necessarily caused by parental unwillingness.
P6 stated: "Some parents want to help, but they are busy or they are also unsure how to teach reading."
Family involvement can reinforce reading development, but teachers should avoid assuming that all families possess equal time, resources, or literacy knowledge. Schools may therefore need to provide simple guidance and accessible home-reading activities.

Theme 6: Teacher Patience, Persistence, and Fulfillment in Nurturing Beginning Readers
Teaching beginning readers was described as emotionally demanding yet highly rewarding.
Positive Experiences
Teachers expressed strong fulfillment when struggling learners achieved reading breakthroughs.
P2 recalled: "The happiest moment is when a child who could not read before comes to you and reads a sentence independently."
Another participant stated:
"Even small progress matters. When they recognize a word without my help, I already feel that our effort is working." - **P8**
Negative Experiences
Slow progress sometimes generated frustration and self-doubt.
P4 explained: "Sometimes you have already tried different strategies, but the learner is still struggling. You ask yourself what else you can do."
Teachers also described the need for considerable patience.
P7 said: "Beginning readers need repetition, and the teacher cannot show impatience because the child may become more afraid to try."
The emotional experience of teaching beginning readers involves a tension between frustration and fulfillment. Progress may be incremental, requiring teachers to redefine success in terms of small but meaningful improvements.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal that teaching beginning readers is a developmental, adaptive, and relational process rather than a simple sequence of literacy exercises. Teachers must continuously assess where learners are,

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determine what specific skill requires strengthening, select appropriate instructional strategies, monitor responses, and adjust instruction.

The theme of uneven readiness demonstrates the importance of diagnostic and formative assessment. Grade 1 learners should not automatically be considered academically equivalent because they belong to the same grade level. Their prior exposure to print, preschool experiences, language development, and home literacy environments may differ considerably.

The second theme emphasizes the developmental relationship between sound awareness, letter knowledge, decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension. Teachers' experiences indicate that recognizing letters does not automatically produce meaningful reading. Some learners may decode mechanically while lacking understanding, whereas others may possess oral vocabulary but struggle to translate it into print.

The importance of repetition and differentiated instruction further demonstrates that beginning readers require multiple opportunities to encounter and practice literacy skills. However, effective repetition should remain purposeful and responsive rather than mechanical. Differentiated support allows teachers to provide an appropriate degree of challenge while preventing struggling learners from becoming overwhelmed.

Contextualization was another important feature of effective instruction. Teachers observed that familiar pictures, objects, situations, and vocabulary generated greater participation. This indicates that early literacy instruction is more accessible when new written language is linked to learners' existing oral knowledge and everyday experiences.

The findings concerning families illustrate the shared nature of literacy development. Regular practice outside school can reinforce classroom learning, yet unequal family circumstances mean that home support cannot be treated as a uniform resource. Schools may therefore need to provide structured, practical, and realistic guidance to families.

Finally, patience and persistence emerged as essential dimensions of teachers' professional experience. Beginning reading progress is often incremental. Teachers may need to repeat instruction numerous times before observing visible improvement. The resulting emotional experience contains both frustration and profound professional satisfaction.

6. Essence of the Phenomenon

The essence of teaching beginning readers may be described as patiently guiding children from uncertainty toward increasingly independent meaning-making through continuous assessment, repetition, adaptation, encouragement, and connection.

Teachers do not merely transmit letter sounds or provide reading exercises. They closely observe individual learners, celebrate small improvements, modify instruction when strategies fail, encourage hesitant children, communicate with families, and repeatedly create opportunities for learners to experience success.

The phenomenon is therefore characterized by a central duality: beginning reading instruction demands persistence because progress can be slow and uneven, yet the gradual emergence of a child's ability and confidence to read provides teachers with a profound sense of professional fulfillment.

7. Conclusion

This phenomenological study highlights the complexity of developing reading skills among Grade 1 learners in the District of Asipulo. Teachers experienced beginning reading instruction as a process shaped by learner readiness, foundational literacy skills, differentiated support, contextualized teaching, home involvement, and sustained teacher patience.

Six themes captured the shared experience: beginning reading as a journey of uneven readiness; building literacy from sounds to meaningful words; repetition and differentiated support as foundations of progress; contextualized and engaging activities as gateways to participation; home–school support as both a

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strength and a challenge; and teacher patience, persistence, and fulfillment in nurturing beginning readers. The findings indicate that effective beginning reading instruction requires more than teaching learners to pronounce printed words. Children need systematic support in sound awareness, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension while experiencing reading as meaningful, achievable, and enjoyable.

Supporting teachers is therefore equally important. Schools should provide appropriate reading resources, professional development, collaborative planning opportunities, intervention materials, and mechanisms for involving families in realistic and constructive ways.

8. Implications for Practice

The findings have several implications for early literacy practice. Grade 1 teachers should conduct regular formative assessments to identify the specific skills learners have mastered and the skills requiring intervention. Reading activities should be differentiated rather than uniformly assigned to learners with markedly different readiness levels. Explicit instruction in phonological awareness, letter–sound relationships, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension should be combined with meaningful stories, conversations, pictures, games, and familiar contexts.

Schools may establish reading intervention periods for learners requiring additional support. Peer-assisted and small-group reading may supplement individual teacher instruction when appropriately supervised. Teachers should also be provided with sufficient developmentally appropriate reading materials.

Family literacy partnerships may be strengthened through simple home-reading guides that demonstrate manageable activities parents or guardians can conduct without requiring specialized teaching knowledge.

Professional learning communities within the District of Asipulo may also provide opportunities for Grade 1 teachers from different schools to exchange intervention strategies, contextualized reading materials, assessment practices, and experiences with beginning readers.

9. Recommendations

Future research may investigate beginning reading from the perspective of Grade 1 learners themselves and examine how children perceive difficulties, encouragement, reading activities, and their own progress. Comparative studies may also examine similarities and differences in reading instruction across schools within the District of Asipulo.

Further research could focus specifically on phonological awareness, decoding difficulties, reading comprehension, home literacy practices, culturally responsive reading materials, or differentiated interventions for struggling readers.

Mixed-methods studies may combine teacher interviews, classroom observations, reading assessments, and family surveys to examine relationships between instructional practices and literacy outcomes.

Longitudinal research could also follow beginning readers from Grade 1 into subsequent grades to determine how foundational reading experiences influence later literacy development.

11. Limitations

Because the study uses a qualitative phenomenological design, the findings are intended to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization to all Grade 1 teachers or learners. Teachers' experiences may differ according to school location, class size, learner characteristics, teaching resources, professional experience, and community context. The final manuscript should report the actual number of participants, schools represented, participant demographics, duration of interviews, data collection period, saturation procedure, and actual participant quotations.

Most importantly, the sample responses presented in this draft must not be represented as collected data. For a genuine journal submission, they should be replaced by verbatim statements obtained through actual interviews with participating Grade 1 teachers.

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