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PREPARING LEARNERS FOR ACADEMIC TRANSITION: TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES IN SUPPORTING ACADEMIC READINESS

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ABSTRACT

Academic readiness in Grade 6 plays a critical role in learners' successful transition to secondary education. As the final stage of elementary schooling, Grade 6 requires learners to demonstrate increased independence, higher-order thinking, and subject-specific competencies. This qualitative study explored teachers' lived experiences in supporting academic readiness among Grade 6 learners at Sta. Cruz Elementary 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: structured instruction for readiness and continuity, scaffolding independence and learning responsibility, assessment-informed preparation for secondary demands, and emotional and professional challenges in transition-focused teaching. Findings indicate that teachers play a pivotal role in bridging elementary and secondary expectations through deliberate instructional practices, yet face structural and emotional challenges that require institutional support. The study highlights implications for curriculum alignment, teacher professional development, and transition-sensitive pedagogy in Philippine basic education.

Keywords: *academic readiness, Grade 6, transition to secondary education, teacher experiences, qualitative study, Philippines*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The transition from elementary to secondary education represents a critical juncture in learners' academic trajectories, with far-reaching implications for educational equity, lifelong learning, and social mobility. In the Philippine education system, Grade 6 serves as the culminating year of elementary schooling and is expected to prepare learners for the academic, cognitive, and behavioral demands of junior high school. At this stage, learners are required to demonstrate increased independence, stronger mastery of core competencies, and readiness for subject-specialized instruction. How effectively this transition is managed has a direct bearing on learners' ability to cope with the increased rigor and complexity of secondary education.

From a global perspective, this transition aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. SDG 4 emphasizes not only access to schooling but also the quality and continuity of learning across educational levels. Ensuring that learners complete elementary education with adequate academic readiness is central to achieving SDG 4, as weak transitions often contribute to learning gaps, disengagement, repetition, and dropout in secondary education. In this sense, Grade 6 functions as a pivotal point where educational systems either strengthen or undermine learners' chances of sustained participation and success in schooling.

Research consistently shows that learners' academic preparedness at the end of elementary school significantly influences their adjustment, performance, and persistence in secondary education. Studies have documented that gaps in foundational knowledge, study skills, and self-regulation frequently result in learning difficulties, low academic confidence, and

disengagement during the transition period. These challenges disproportionately affect learners in public and resource-constrained schools, raising concerns about equity and inclusion key principles embedded in SDG 4. While curriculum frameworks and policy documents emphasize readiness, progression, and continuity, the responsibility of translating these expectations into meaningful classroom practice rests largely on teachers, particularly those teaching Grade 6. Teachers in Grade 6 occupy a unique and demanding instructional position. They are expected to reinforce foundational competencies acquired in earlier grades while simultaneously introducing more complex academic tasks that resemble secondary-level expectations. In addition, they play a crucial role in developing learners' independence, responsibility, and learning habits skills that are essential for success beyond elementary education. This dual responsibility positions Grade 6 teachers as key agents in promoting educational continuity and supporting learners' transition, thereby contributing directly to the goals of quality and inclusive education articulated in SDG 4. However, teachers often perform this role within contexts marked by curriculum density, time constraints, large class sizes, and limited instructional resources.

Despite the critical importance of Grade 6 teaching in ensuring academic readiness and advancing broader educational goals, teachers' lived experiences in supporting learner transition remain underexplored in the Philippine context. Much of the existing literature focuses on learner outcomes or policy intentions, with less attention given to how teachers navigate the practical, pedagogical, and emotional demands of transition-focused instruction. This gap is particularly evident in public elementary schools, where contextual constraints may significantly shape instructional decisions and teacher agency.



This study addresses this gap by examining teachers' experiences in supporting academic readiness in Grade 6 at Sta. Cruz Elementary School. By foregrounding teachers' voices and classroom practices, the study provides contextually grounded insights into how academic readiness is constructed in everyday teaching. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of transition-focused pedagogy in Philippine basic education and highlights the crucial role of teachers in advancing both national education goals and the global commitment to SDG 4: Quality Education.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore teachers' lived experiences in supporting academic readiness among Grade 6 learners. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Describe instructional practices used by teachers to prepare learners for secondary-level academic demands.
2. Examine how teachers scaffold learner independence, responsibility, and higher-order thinking.
3. Explore teachers' use of assessment to guide readiness and transition-focused instruction.
4. Identify challenges and emotional demands encountered in Grade 6 transition-oriented teaching.
5. Derive implications for curriculum alignment, teacher support, and transition-sensitive pedagogy.

3. Methods of the Study

A qualitative case study design was employed to allow an in-depth exploration of instructional practices and teachers' lived experiences within a bounded school context. This research design was deemed appropriate

for examining the complex pedagogical processes involved in supporting academic readiness and facilitating learners' transition from elementary to secondary education. By focusing on a single school setting, the case study approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how transition-focused teaching is enacted in real classroom contexts.

The study was conducted at Sta. Cruz Elementary School. Participants consisted of Grade 6 teachers who were purposively selected based on their direct responsibility for preparing learners for secondary-level academic demands. All participating teachers had several years of experience teaching upper elementary grades, providing them with informed perspectives on learner readiness, instructional continuity, and transition-related challenges.

Data were gathered using multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation of findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' instructional decisions, beliefs about academic readiness, and perceived challenges in preparing learners for secondary education. Classroom observations focused on teaching strategies, the promotion of learner autonomy, and practices explicitly oriented toward transition readiness. In addition, document analysis was undertaken to examine lesson plans, assessment tools, and instructional guides related to Grade 6 competencies, offering contextual evidence to support and validate interview and observation data. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data through constant comparison across interviews, observations, and documents. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, multiple strategies were employed, including triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants, and the maintenance of audit trails to document analytic decisions and processes.



4. Results and Findings

Analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and instructional documents revealed four major themes that describe how teachers support academic readiness among Grade 6 learners. These themes capture the instructional, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of transition-focused teaching and illustrate how teachers intentionally prepare learners for the increased demands of secondary education.

Theme 1: Structured Instruction for Readiness and Continuity

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of structured and clearly sequenced instruction as a key strategy for preparing learners for secondary-level academic expectations. Participants explained that Grade 6 instruction is deliberately designed to resemble junior high school practices, including longer tasks, increased subject-based rigor, and greater emphasis on independent seatwork. This gradual escalation of academic demands was viewed as essential in helping learners adjust to the pace, depth, and expectations of secondary education.

One teacher explained, “*Sa Grade 6, kailangan masanay na sila sa mas seryosong tasks kasi iba na ang expectations sa high school.*” Another participant shared, “*Pinapahaba ko na ang activities at seatwork para masanay sila mag-isip nang mas malalim,*” while a third noted, “*Hindi na puwedeng spoon-feeding sa Grade 6, dapat ready na sila sa next level.*” These responses reflect teachers’ intentional efforts to bridge elementary and secondary instructional cultures.

Interpretively, this theme aligns with readiness and transition frameworks that emphasize continuity and gradual academic escalation as critical to successful school transitions. Research suggests that learners

benefit when instructional practices in the final year of elementary school progressively align with secondary expectations, reducing academic shock and adjustment difficulties (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Symonds & Galton, 2014). By structuring instruction to mirror secondary demands, teachers function as key mediators of curriculum continuity, ensuring that readiness is actively constructed rather than assumed.

Theme 2: Scaffolding Independence and Learning Responsibility

A second prominent theme highlights teachers’ deliberate efforts to scaffold learner independence and responsibility for learning. Participants described implementing self-directed activities, research tasks, group projects, and accountability routines to help learners manage their own learning. These practices were intended to shift learners from teacher-dependent behaviors toward greater autonomy, a skill perceived as essential for success in secondary education.

One teacher stated, “*Pinapa-practice ko na sila mag-manage ng tasks kasi sa high school, hindi na sila tutok,*” emphasizing the need for learners to develop self-management skills. Another shared, “*Unti-unti ko nang binabawasan ang guidance para matuto silang mag-desisyon,*” while a third explained, “*Pinapagawa ko na sila ng simple research para masanay sa independent work.*” These accounts demonstrate teachers’ conscious role in cultivating learner autonomy. This theme underscores the importance of self-regulation and learning responsibility as predictors of successful secondary transition. Research on academic readiness highlights that learners’ ability to manage tasks, regulate effort, and take responsibility for learning significantly influences their adjustment and performance in secondary school (Zimmerman, 2002; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The findings suggest that Grade 6 teachers play a critical role in fostering these



competencies through scaffolded independence rather than abrupt withdrawal of support.

Theme 3: Assessment-Informed Preparation for Secondary Demands

Assessment-informed instruction emerged as a central strategy in preparing learners for secondary-level academic demands. Teachers described using diagnostic, formative, and classroom-based assessments to identify readiness gaps in key areas such as reading comprehension, problem-solving, and written expression. Assessment results were used to guide remediation, enrichment, and targeted support rather than solely for grading purposes.

One participant noted, "*Kapag nakita naming mahina pa sa reading o problem-solving, doon kami nagfocus,*" while another explained, "*Assessment ang basehan kung sino ang kailangan ng extra support,*" and a third added, "*Hindi puwedeng hulaan kung ready na sila, kailangan may basehan.*" These responses illustrate a reflective and data-informed approach to readiness preparation.

Interpretively, this theme aligns with formative assessment literature emphasizing the role of assessment in monitoring learning progress and informing instructional decisions, particularly before critical educational transitions (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Heritage, 2010). In transition-focused teaching, assessment serves as an early warning system that allows teachers to address gaps proactively rather than reactively. The findings reinforce the importance of assessment literacy in Grade 6 instruction as a mechanism for ensuring academic preparedness.

Theme 4: Emotional and Professional Demands of Transition-Focused Teaching

Beyond instructional practices, teachers described the emotional and professional demands associated with preparing learners for secondary education. Participants

expressed feelings of pressure, anxiety, and moral responsibility related to learners' future academic success. Teaching Grade 6 was often described as a high-stakes role, as teachers perceived themselves as the final gatekeepers before learners enter a more demanding academic environment.

One teacher reflected, "*Parang pasan mo kung handa na ba talaga sila pagdating sa high school,*" while another shared, "*May pressure kasi alam mong dito nakasalalay ang foundation nila,*" and a third stated, "*Mas mabigat ang Grade 6 kasi transition year ito.*" These responses reveal the emotional weight attached to transition-focused teaching.

This theme underscores teaching as emotional labor, particularly in high-stakes transition years. Hargreaves (1998) conceptualizes teaching as inherently emotional work, involving care, responsibility, and moral commitment. Similarly, Day and Gu (2010) emphasize that teachers' emotional resilience is closely tied to their ability to sustain effective practice under pressure. The findings suggest that supporting academic readiness involves not only pedagogical expertise but also emotional investment, highlighting the need for institutional recognition and support for teachers handling transition years.

Summary of Findings

Collectively, the four themes illustrate that supporting academic readiness in Grade 6 is a complex, intentional, and emotionally demanding process. Teachers actively construct readiness through structured instruction, scaffolded independence, assessment-informed decision-making, and sustained emotional commitment. While teachers demonstrate strong professional agency, the findings also point to the need for systemic support to sustain effective transition-focused teaching practices.

5. Discussion



This study examined how teachers support academic readiness among Grade 6 learners as they prepare for the transition to secondary education. The findings demonstrate that academic readiness is not an automatic outcome of curriculum completion but a deliberately constructed process shaped by instructional structure, learner autonomy, assessment practices, and emotional labor. Teachers emerged as central agents in mediating continuity between elementary and secondary education, reinforcing the critical role of Grade 6 instruction in learners' academic trajectories.

The prominence of structured instruction for readiness and continuity highlights teachers' intentional alignment of Grade 6 practices with secondary-level expectations. By gradually increasing task complexity, emphasizing subject-based rigor, and promoting independent seatwork, teachers sought to familiarize learners with the academic culture of junior high school. This finding aligns with transition research suggesting that continuity in instructional expectations reduces learner anxiety and academic shock during school transitions (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Symonds & Galton, 2014). Rather than abruptly shifting pedagogical approaches at the secondary level, readiness-focused teaching allows learners to develop confidence and competence incrementally. The findings reinforce the view that curriculum continuity is enacted not only through policy but through teachers' everyday instructional decisions.

The theme of scaffolding independence and learning responsibility further underscores the role of Grade 6 teachers in fostering self-regulation and learner autonomy. Teachers deliberately reduced instructional scaffolding while increasing opportunities for self-directed learning, research tasks, and accountability routines. These practices reflect an understanding that success in secondary education depends not only on content knowledge but also on learners' ability to manage tasks, regulate effort, and assume responsibility

for learning. This finding is consistent with research identifying self-regulated learning as a key predictor of academic adjustment and persistence during educational transitions (Zimmerman, 2002; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The study extends this literature by illustrating how self-regulation is actively cultivated through classroom practices rather than assumed as a developmental outcome.

Assessment-informed preparation for secondary demands emerged as a critical mechanism through which teachers monitored readiness and addressed learning gaps. Teachers' use of diagnostic and formative assessments enabled targeted remediation and enrichment in key areas such as reading comprehension and problem-solving. This practice aligns with formative assessment literature emphasizing the importance of using assessment data to inform instruction and support learner progress, particularly before high-stakes transitions (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Heritage, 2010). In the context of Grade 6, assessment functioned as a readiness lens, allowing teachers to intervene proactively rather than responding reactively to difficulties encountered in secondary school. These findings highlight assessment literacy as a crucial component of transition-focused teaching.

Beyond instructional and assessment practices, the study foregrounds the emotional and professional demands of transition-focused teaching. Teachers described a strong sense of moral responsibility for learners' future success, often accompanied by pressure, anxiety, and emotional strain. This finding reinforces conceptualizations of teaching as emotional labor, particularly in high-stakes contexts where teachers perceive their work as consequential for learners' long-term outcomes (Hargreaves, 1998). Day and Gu (2010) further argue that teachers' emotional resilience is integral to sustaining effective practice under such conditions. The findings suggest that while Grade 6 teachers demonstrate strong professional commitment,



the emotional dimensions of readiness-focused teaching require greater institutional recognition and support.

Taken together, the findings indicate that academic readiness in Grade 6 is constructed through the interaction of pedagogical rigor, learner autonomy, assessment-informed decision-making, and emotional investment. Teachers act as bridges between elementary and secondary education, yet their efforts are shaped by systemic conditions such as curriculum demands, time constraints, and accountability pressures. The study thus reinforces the need to conceptualize academic readiness as both an instructional and relational process, requiring alignment between curriculum policy, school structures, and teacher well-being.

6. Implications

The findings of the study point to several important implications for educational practice and policy, particularly in strengthening learners' transition from Grade 6 to Grade 7. First, there is a clear need to strengthen curriculum alignment between Grade 6 and Grade 7 to ensure continuity in content, skills, and academic expectations. Aligning learning competencies, assessment practices, and instructional approaches across the two levels can help reduce the academic shock often experienced by learners as they move to secondary education. Such alignment enables Grade 6 teachers to prepare learners more deliberately for the rigor and learning demands of junior high school, while allowing Grade 7 teachers to build on learners' prior knowledge rather than reteaching foundational concepts.

Second, the study underscores the importance of professional development focused on transition-sensitive and readiness-oriented teaching. Teachers, particularly those handling Grade 6, would benefit from sustained training that equips them with strategies for scaffolding learner independence, fostering higher-

order thinking, and managing increased academic rigor. Professional development programs should emphasize pedagogical approaches that bridge elementary and secondary teaching practices, such as extended tasks, inquiry-based learning, and formative assessment for readiness. Providing opportunities for collaboration between Grade 6 and Grade 7 teachers can further enhance shared understanding of learner expectations and instructional continuity.

The findings also highlight the need to institutionalize transition readiness assessments as part of upper elementary education. Systematic assessment of learners' academic skills, learning habits, and self-regulation can help identify readiness gaps prior to secondary transition. These assessments should be used diagnostically rather than punitively, guiding targeted remediation, enrichment, and support for learners who may struggle with secondary-level demands. Institutionalizing such assessments ensures that readiness is monitored consistently and addressed proactively, rather than being left to individual teacher initiative.

Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of recognizing the emotional labor involved in Grade 6 teaching. Preparing learners for secondary education entails significant emotional responsibility, as teachers often feel accountable for learners' future academic success. Acknowledging this emotional dimension is essential in promoting teacher well-being and instructional sustainability. School leaders and policymakers should foster supportive environments that value teachers' emotional efforts, provide opportunities for collegial support, and reduce unnecessary workload pressures. Recognizing emotional labor not only affirms teachers' professional experiences but also contributes to more effective and sustainable transition-focused teaching practices.

8. Conclusion



This study demonstrates that Grade 6 teachers play a pivotal role in preparing learners for secondary education through deliberate instructional, assessment, and relational practices. Academic readiness is not incidental but intentionally cultivated amid significant cognitive and emotional demands. Sustaining effective transition preparation requires aligned curricula, institutional support, and recognition of teachers' professional expertise.

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