



Echoes of Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Teaching Phonemic Awareness

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of elementary school teachers in teaching phonemic awareness in the San Jose District, Division of Dinagat Islands. Using Colaizzi's method, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with teachers from ten elementary schools. Key themes revealed that while teachers employed effective strategies such as explicit instruction and multimedia resources, they also encountered significant challenges, ranging from student retention issues and lack of phonemic skills to limited teaching materials. The findings emphasized the crucial role of parental involvement, the importance of continuous professional development, and the emotional and motivational support teachers provide to struggling readers. Teachers also expressed concern over curriculum pressures and time constraints, especially when addressing the diverse needs of learners, including those requiring special education support. The study highlights the multifaceted realities of phonemic awareness instruction and the urgent need for systemic support to enhance literacy outcomes in early education.

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Introduction

Learning to read marks a crucial milestone in every child's educational journey, laying the groundwork for all future academic achievement. In the Philippine basic education system, the first start of reading typically occurs in Kindergarten and Grade 1, where learners are introduced to the foundational skills of oral language, phonological awareness, and early decoding. According to DepEd Order No. 31, s. 2019 In the Policy Guidelines on the Implementation of the Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Program (ELLN), the Department of Education emphasizes the importance of developing early reading competencies through evidence-based instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Phonemic awareness—hearing, identifying, and manipulating individual sounds in spoken words—is central to early literacy. This auditory skill supports children in recognizing how sounds correspond to letters and how words are formed through blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemes. As outlined in DepEd Order No. 12 series of 2020, which details the adoption of Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs), phonemic awareness is one of the prioritized competencies under the English subject in early grades. The new MATATAG Curriculum, launched to decongest content and strengthen foundational learning, emphasizes these early reading competencies in Kindergarten to Grade 3.

Extensive research underscores the significance of phonemic awareness in early literacy development. Studies have shown that direct, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness enhances children's reading proficiency, particularly when integrated with systematic phonics instruction, as cited in the works of Rivera & Flores (2024) ^[18] and Sutfin (2025) ^[23]. Effective phonemic awareness instruction includes sound segmentation, blending, and rhyming, which help learners develop their phonological processing skills according to Sutfin (2025) ^[23].

However, Sutfin's research also indicates that successful implementation depends on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, access to instructional resources, and professional development opportunities. Despite these findings, little is known about how teachers navigate the challenges of teaching phonemic awareness in diverse and often resource-limited classrooms, particularly in the Philippine educational context.

While previous studies have explored phonemic awareness interventions, few have focused on the lived experiences of teachers implementing them. In the Philippine setting, where early literacy is guided by the MATATAG Curriculum, understanding teachers' struggles and strategies is essential to bridging the gap between policy and practice. At Aurelio Elementary School in the San Jose District, data revealed that 128 out of 344 Grade 1–3 pupils (37.21%) were emerging readers unable to identify or blend sounds, while 120 out of 246 Grade 4–6 pupils (48.39%) were at the frustration level, based on Phil-IRI results. These findings underscore the need to examine the instructional realities of Grade 1 to Grade 4 teachers. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach and Colaizzi's method to capture their insights and experiences teaching phonemic awareness.

Problem Statement

This study aimed to explore the experiences of elementary school teachers in teaching phonemic awareness in the San Jose District, Division of Dinagat Islands.

Methods

Research Design

The research design for the study was based on Colaizzi's qualitative phenomenological approach to describe the phenomenon comprehensively. This approach was particularly appropriate as it allows for a deep exploration of the personal experiences. Phenomenology aimed to understand the essence of experiences and was well-suited for uncovering the meaning attached to the informants' encounters (Alendajao *et al.*, 2024)^[1].

Research Environment

This study was conducted in ten (10) elementary schools within the San Jose District, Division of Dinagat Islands. These schools offered a complete elementary education program from Kindergarten to Grade 6 and were part of the formal public-school system under the Department of Education. The schools varied regarding resources, student population, and teaching conditions, providing a diverse yet contextualized setting for exploring teachers' experiences in teaching phonemic awareness.

Informants

The informants of this study were ten (10) elementary school teachers in the San Jose District, Division of Dinagat Islands. To ensure that they possessed a strong background in literacy instruction, particularly in phonemic awareness, they were identified by using purposive sampling. The informants were Grade 1 to Grade 4 teachers, designated as permanent Department of Education (DepED) teachers. They had at least 3 years' experience teaching phonemic awareness, and were willing to convey their experiences.

Research Instrument

This study utilized an interview guide as the primary research

instrument for data collection. The interview guide was designed to explore teachers' experiences in phonemic awareness, including their instructional strategies, challenges encountered, and suggestions for improvement.

The instrument was validated by experts in literacy education and qualitative research to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability.

Ethics and Data Gathering Procedure

This study adhered to ethical guidelines and obtained necessary approvals before data collection. The researcher secured permits from the Public Schools District Office of San Jose, Division Dinagat Islands, and then sought school heads' permission to interview selected teachers.

Ten elementary school teachers participated, each fully informed about the study's objectives and ethical considerations. Participants signed an Informed Consent Form outlining voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Their identities and responses remained confidential, and data were used solely for academic purposes.

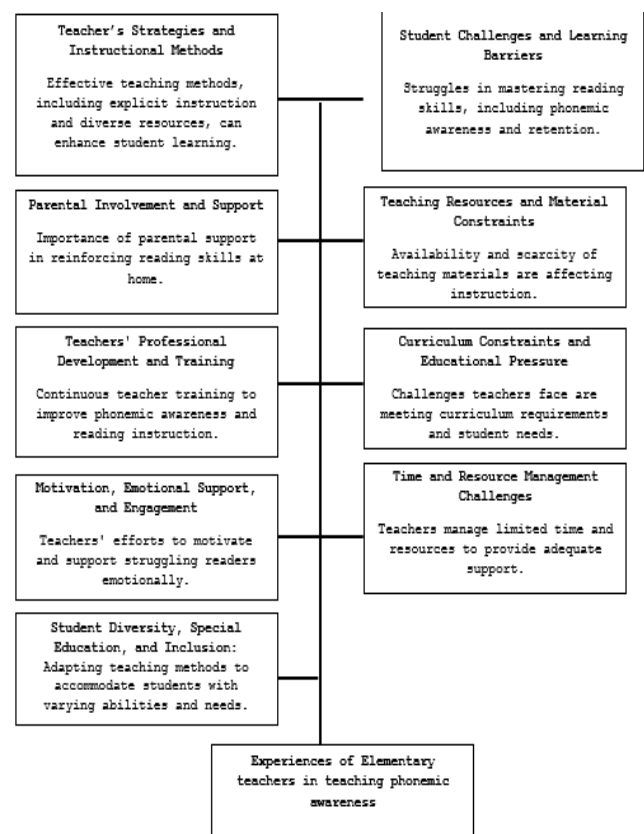


Fig 1: Illustrates the research process:

1. Informants – Ten elementary school teachers shared experiences on phonemic awareness instruction.
2. Researcher's Role – One-on-one interviews were conducted with probing follow-up questions to gather insights.
3. Narrative Data Collection – Responses were recorded and transcribed.
4. Descriptive Phenomenology – Colaizzi's method was used for data analysis and reviewed by a qualitative research expert.
5. Findings – The final phase presented key themes and insights from the data.

Data Analysis

The collected data from the experiences of elementary school teachers in teaching phonemic awareness in the San Jose District, Division of Dinagat Islands, was analyzed following Colaizzi's (1978) strategy for phenomenological data analysis.

Results and Discussion

The following presents the results and analysis of the study, focusing on the themes that emerged from the data gathered through teacher interviews.

Figure 1 shows a thematic map of Elementary teachers' experiences in teaching phonemic awareness with an exhaustive description of the emergent themes.

The emergent themes of this study reflect the key factors that influence phonemic awareness instruction and the teaching of reading skills. These themes provide a comprehensive overview of the experiences, such as challenges and strategies, within the educational landscape, offering insights into the instructional process and the environment in which it occurs.

Thematic Map of the Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Teaching Phonemic Awareness with Exhaustive Description of the Emergent Themes.

Teacher Strategies and Instructional Methods

Teachers employ diverse strategies to effectively teach reading skills, utilizing traditional and modern resources while adapting to students' varying needs (DiDio, 2024) ^[9]. Explicit teaching, such as modeling sound pronunciation, blending letters, and using game-based activities, fosters phonemic awareness and reading fluency. Teachers also integrate structured methods like the Fuller Approach to help students decode words, with frequent use of visual and auditory tools, such as flashcards and videos, to enhance learning (Jensen, 2024) ^[12]. However, external pressures like the Matatag Curriculum's reading benchmarks and home distractions hinder students' reading development outside school (Nadeem *et al.*, 2023) ^[15]. Teachers' use of multimedia resources and creative strategies, such as music and dancing in videos or game-based learning, reflects their efforts to engage students and address motivational issues (Rone *et al.*, 2023) ^[19]. These findings suggest that increased parental involvement, reduced curriculum pressures, and continuous teacher training are necessary to support effective phonemic awareness instruction.

Parental Involvement and Support

Parental involvement is crucial in enhancing children's reading development in and out of the classroom (Lupo *et al.*, 2023) ^[13]. Active parental engagement in reinforcing lessons significantly improves students' ability to apply reading skills. However, challenges like work commitments and parents' literacy limitations often hinder this support (Oranga *et al.*, 2023) ^[16]. Teachers emphasize the importance of creating collaborative partnerships between parents and schools to address these barriers and ensure continuous support for students. Initiatives like the Project SPARE, which helps parents assist with reading, demonstrate the positive impact of such partnerships (Durack, 2023) ^[10].

However, illiteracy and lack of time hinder some parents from effectively supporting their children's literacy development (Formulated Meaning 227). While teachers recognize the value of parental involvement, these obstacles

often leave struggling students without the reinforcement they need at home (Formulated Meaning 170). The theme underscores the shared responsibility between teachers and parents in children's education, suggesting that schools should explore community-based solutions to overcome these challenges (Lupo *et al.*, 2023) ^[13].

Teachers' Professional Development and Training

Teacher professional development is vital for equipping educators with the necessary skills and tools to teach phonemic awareness and reading effectively (Zeng, 2023) ^[25]. It ensures that teachers stay updated on the latest strategies and methods, crucial for supporting students, particularly struggling readers. However, even after attending training seminars, teachers often lack confidence in applying new techniques, indicating the need for continuous support and mentoring (Formulated Meaning 24). These development programs, which focus on phonemic awareness and reading skills, enable teachers to enhance their effectiveness in delivering foundational lessons like letter sounds and blends (Formulated Meaning 78).

Moreover, professional development helps teachers refine their strategies to better support diverse learning needs, especially for students facing reading challenges (Smith & Robinson, 2020) ^[21]. Peer collaboration and guidance from experienced co-teachers significantly improve teaching methods (Formulated Meaning 80). Despite initial training gaps, teachers recognize the importance of ongoing development in refining their instructional practices, ensuring that they can address the needs of all students, including those in higher grades who struggle with reading (Formulated Meaning 79). Continuous professional growth is essential to enhance teaching strategies and support teachers in meeting literacy benchmarks and adapting to learners' challenges.

Motivation, Emotional Support, and Engagement

The theme emphasizes the crucial role of emotional support and motivation in overcoming learning barriers, especially for struggling readers. It highlights that academic success is influenced by cognitive ability, a child's emotional state, and motivation to learn (Clarke, 2024) ^[6]. Teachers play a key role in fostering an environment of encouragement, building student confidence, and keeping them engaged in learning. Teachers who provide emotional support can help students persist in their efforts, particularly when facing reading challenges (Sawchuk, 2024) ^[20].

Teachers use various strategies to motivate students and provide emotional encouragement. For instance, a points system paired with rewarding good readers helps motivate students through competition, while emotional reinforcement supports their perseverance (Formulated Meaning 252). Intrinsic motivation is nurtured through teacher engagement, while external rewards help struggling students stay motivated (Formulated Meaning 253). Despite challenges, teachers derive satisfaction from students' progress, underscoring the importance of emotional investment in student success. Ultimately, the theme illustrates that emotional support and motivation are essential for early readers' academic achievement.

Student Diversity, Special Education, and Inclusion

The theme highlights teachers' significant challenges in accommodating diverse learning needs, particularly for

students with special education requirements or developmental delays (Block, 2022). Inclusive education has become increasingly complex as teachers are pressured to ensure all students, regardless of ability, meet reading standards (Barnard & Henn, 2023)^[2]. Teachers struggle with balancing expectations for students who may not be developmentally ready, leading to frustration when students, especially those with learning disabilities, fail to meet basic reading standards despite repeated attempts (Formulated Meaning 13, 14). Additionally, students with special needs, such as those with autism or attention deficits, require unique approaches to engage them in reading (Formulated Meaning 221).

Teachers often lack specialized resources or training to adequately support these students, making it challenging to provide individualized instruction (Formulated Meaning 113). Despite this, teachers adapt by using creative methods such as one-on-one teaching and modifying instructional materials (Formulated Meaning 204). The growing recognition that students with varying abilities need personalized attention and support underscores the importance of specialized resources and training (Buzolich, 2024). Teachers continue to go above and beyond, even using spare time to offer additional help, highlighting their dedication to ensuring every student can progress at their own pace.

Student Challenges and Learning Barriers

The theme highlights students' significant learning challenges, particularly in retaining phonemic awareness and foundational reading skills (Coulter-Glazier, 2023)^[8]. Despite teachers' diverse instructional efforts, cognitive and behavioral barriers, such as poor memory retention and attention issues, persist, hindering students' progress. Teachers often find that students struggle to retain previously learned material, especially letter-sound associations, even after repeated practice (Formulated Meaning 14, 43). This lack of retention and cognitive challenges creates a cycle where students temporarily perform well but regress over time, particularly in phonemic awareness and blending sounds (Formulated Meaning 27).

Additionally, students face difficulties connecting letter sounds to their written form, especially with consonants (Formulated Meaning 25). The emergent theme underscores the importance of differentiated instruction and targeted support to address these barriers. Teachers emphasize the need for specialized attention, such as reading support teachers for struggling students, to ensure consistent progress (Chien, 2021)^[5]. To overcome these challenges, effective reading instruction must be tailored to each student's cognitive needs, supported by additional help from families and communities to reinforce learning beyond the classroom (Capin *et al.*, 2022)^[4].

Teaching Resources and Material Constraints

The theme highlights the essential role of access to appropriate teaching materials in effective instruction, especially for early literacy development (Clarke, 2024)^[6]. Adequate resources, such as printed materials, videos, and interactive tools, are necessary to support phonemic awareness and other foundational reading skills. However, teachers often face challenges due to limited or unavailable resources, leading to the need for creative solutions. For instance, teachers frequently spend personal funds on

materials or rely on downloading online resources to supplement what is available (Formulated Meaning 19, 235). The lack of basic supplies like printer ink can significantly hinder learning, forcing teachers to print materials at home (Formulated Meaning 179).

The scarcity of resources emphasizes the need for systemic support, such as government-provided reading materials, to ensure equitable access to teaching tools (Idulog *et al.*, 2023)^[11]. Teachers use alternatives like visual aids and multimedia tools, such as videos, to engage students, but these are often stopgap measures in response to resource gaps (Formulated Meaning 116, 29). The ongoing struggle to secure adequate materials underscores the importance of timely and consistent access to teaching resources to prevent delays in instruction and support effective learning outcomes (MORALISTA *et al.*, 2022)^[14].

Curriculum Constraints and Educational Pressure

The theme explores teachers' challenges when meeting curriculum standards and educational policies prioritizing measurable outcomes like reading proficiency (Beyond the Four Walls, 2024)^[3]. Teachers are expected to ensure that all students meet specific competencies by the end of the academic year, which can be overwhelming, especially for students who need individualized attention. This pressure often leaves little room for flexibility, making it challenging to address the diverse needs of students, particularly non-readers (Formulated Meaning 8, 36).

The focus on meeting curriculum goals, such as those set by the MATATAG Curriculum, often conflicts with the need for personalized support for struggling learners. Teachers are burdened by the emotional strain of ensuring students meet these milestones, while struggling readers require more tailored attention (Formulated Meaning 136, 100). This tension highlights the challenge of balancing curriculum demands with student-centered learning, emphasizing a more flexible and supportive approach to teaching literacy (Véliz & Véliz-Campos, 2023)^[24]. Teachers advocate for a focus on student needs over rigid curriculum expectations to improve learning outcomes, suggesting a need for systemic adjustments in how educational standards are implemented.

Time and Resource Management Challenges

The theme highlights teachers' difficulties managing limited time and resources to provide quality education, particularly for struggling readers (Stark *et al.*, 2023)^[22]. Teachers often have to be resourceful, using creative solutions such as supplementing lessons with downloaded videos or spending personal funds on materials like paper and ink (Formulated Meaning 19, 70). The shortage of essential resources, like printed reading materials, forces teachers to think outside the box, relying on free online resources or adapting their teaching methods to make the most of what is available (Formulated Meaning 45).

Moreover, teachers also manage their time creatively to provide additional support, using spare moments before or after class to conduct reading sessions (Formulated Meaning 45, 179). Many go beyond their scheduled hours, working overtime to help students with reading challenges (Formulated Meaning 70). Despite the constraints, teachers remain committed to student success, reflecting their dedication by sacrificing personal time and finding innovative ways to maximize learning opportunities (Jensen, 2024)^[12]. These challenges underscore the urgent need for

better resource allocation and more flexible time management to ensure that every student receives the support they need to develop essential reading skills (Patete, 2024)^[17].

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that diverse instructional strategies, including explicit teaching and multimedia resources, are essential for developing students' phonemic awareness. Parental involvement is critical in reinforcing reading skills at home, while teachers require continuous professional development to enhance their methods and respond to various challenges. Students benefit significantly from motivation and emotional support, especially when facing learning barriers. Teaching in mixed-ability and inclusive classrooms presents significant difficulties, highlighting the need for specialized support for learners with diverse needs. Poor memory retention and limited mastery of phonemic awareness hinder reading progress. The availability of instructional materials significantly affects early literacy development, and in the face of shortages, teachers often find alternative solutions. Curriculum demands and educational standards create additional pressure, contributing to teacher stress. Lastly, time and resource limitations compel teachers to invest extra effort beyond class hours to ensure effective phonemic awareness instruction.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and conclusions, the study revealed several key insights: The Department of Education (DepEd) should support teachers in addressing diverse learning styles and developing phonemic awareness by providing exposure to best practices, high-quality instructional materials, additional staff assistance, and reducing non-instructional duties. Teachers must receive professional development and specialized support in phonemic awareness and classroom management to enhance instructional practices and maintain emotional support for students. Students should use strategies like spaced repetition and connect new information to prior knowledge by creating mental images and relating concepts to real-world examples to overcome student challenges and learning barriers.

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