



Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers on Literacy Development: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological research explored the lived experiences of elementary teachers regarding literacy development in four selected schools in Nabunturan East District. The 8 selected elementary teachers who provided literacy instruction were the participants in the study. It aimed to understand the experiences and challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the insights they can share to improve literacy instruction. Using a phenomenological research design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and significant themes. Findings revealed that teachers face various challenges in developing learners' literacy skills, including diverse learning needs, limited instructional time and resources, low learner engagement, and insufficient parental support. Despite these difficulties, teachers demonstrated resilience by employing adaptive strategies such as differentiated instruction, varied teaching materials, and constant practice. Teaching that requires patience, creativity, flexibility, and a learner-centered approach. The study concludes that supporting teachers through adequate resources, professional development, and strengthened school-home partnerships is essential in improving literacy outcomes. The insights drawn from this research may serve as a basis for enhancing instructional practices and informing policies that support literacy development among elementary learners.

Keywords

elementary education, literacy development, lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms

How to Cite

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy development is widely recognized as the foundation of children's academic success, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and meaningful participation in society. Contemporary literacy instruction extends beyond teaching learners to decode printed text; it encompasses the development of comprehension, vocabulary, critical reasoning, communication, and motivation to read. International evidence demonstrates that systematic literacy instruction significantly improves reading proficiency when teachers employ evidence-based instructional strategies, particularly explicit phonics instruction, differentiated teaching, timely feedback, and culturally responsive pedagogies (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2001; Kelly et

al., 2021). Equally important, learners' intrinsic motivation, supported by positive teacher-student interactions and effective classroom feedback, substantially influences literacy achievement and sustained engagement in reading (Becker et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Consequently, effective literacy development depends not only on instructional techniques but also on supportive learning environments that nurture learners' motivation, confidence, and engagement.

Within the Philippine educational context, improving literacy remains a national priority because many elementary learners continue to experience reading difficulties despite numerous literacy initiatives. Teachers frequently encounter classrooms characterized by diverse reading abilities, limited instructional resources, insufficient parental involvement, and increasing instructional demands. Such conditions require teachers to employ flexible instructional approaches while balancing curriculum expectations and learner diversity. Recent Philippine studies likewise emphasize that meaningful parental engagement, effective instructional supervision, and sustained professional support contribute significantly to improving learners' academic performance and literacy development (Cariaga et al., 2025; Goc-Ong & Doronio, 2025; Saro et al., 2025). These realities highlight the increasingly complex role of elementary teachers as facilitators of literacy instruction within resource-constrained educational environments.

Although previous studies have extensively examined literacy instruction, professional development, reading interventions, and learner achievement, relatively little qualitative evidence explains how elementary teachers themselves experience literacy development within provincial public-school contexts. Existing literature has predominantly focused on instructional effectiveness, intervention outcomes, or learner performance rather than exploring teachers' lived experiences, adaptive practices, emotional challenges, and professional insights that shape literacy instruction. Moreover, limited phenomenological research has documented how teachers navigate diverse learner needs, institutional constraints, and home-school partnerships while sustaining motivation and instructional effectiveness. Addressing this empirical and contextual gap contributes deeper understanding of literacy instruction from teachers' perspectives and complements existing quantitative evidence on literacy improvement initiatives.

This study explored the lived experiences of elementary teachers in developing learners' literacy in four selected public elementary schools in the Nabunturan East District, Davao de Oro, during School Year 2025–2026. Specifically, it examines teachers' experiences, instructional challenges, coping mechanisms, and professional insights regarding literacy development. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), the study seeks to understand how teachers sustain motivation, autonomy, competence, and meaningful relationships while facilitating literacy instruction. The findings are expected to provide evidence that supports instructional improvement, informs teacher professional development programs, strengthens school-home partnerships, and guides educational policy related to literacy instruction. Although the findings are context-specific and based on a relatively small group of participants, they contribute valuable qualitative evidence that enriches current knowledge on literacy development and offers practical implications for improving literacy education in Philippine elementary schools.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design anchored in the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. Phenomenology seeks to understand and describe the essence of individuals' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon by examining how participants construct meaning from their personal experiences. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to explore how elementary teachers experience literacy development, the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they employ, and the professional insights they derive from their instructional practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The research design aligned closely with the study objectives by privileging participants' subjective experiences rather than measuring predetermined variables. Furthermore, the investigation was theoretically guided by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which explains how autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence teachers' motivation and professional engagement in literacy instruction.

Sampling

The study utilized purposive sampling to recruit information-rich participants who possessed substantial experience in elementary literacy instruction. Eight elementary teachers from Libasan Elementary School, Cabidanan Elementary School, Cabacungan Elementary School, and Manat Central Elementary School in the Nabunturan East District, Davao de Oro, participated during School Year 2025–2026. Participants met the following inclusion criteria: (a) currently teaching elementary learners; (b) directly responsible for literacy or reading instruction; (c) possessing at least three years of teaching experience in literacy education; and (d) voluntarily agreeing to participate through informed consent. Teachers with less than three years of literacy teaching experience or those not directly involved in literacy instruction were excluded. The sample size was justified through the principle of information power, wherein participants with extensive and relevant experience provided sufficiently rich data to address the research objectives (Malterud et al., 2016).

Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide validated by experts in educational research and literacy instruction. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from appropriate educational authorities and school administrators. Participants received a comprehensive orientation regarding the study's objectives, procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and ethical safeguards before signing informed consent forms. Interviews were conducted individually in locations convenient to participants and were facilitated using English, Filipino, or Cebuano, depending on participant preference to ensure authentic expression of experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant permission. Field notes

documenting contextual observations and non-verbal communication supplemented the interview recordings. Audio files were transcribed verbatim, translated into English when necessary, and carefully reviewed for accuracy before analysis.

Analysis

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Significant statements were then coded systematically to identify meaningful units relevant to the research questions. Related codes were subsequently organized into preliminary themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' narratives. Themes were reviewed, refined, defined, and appropriately labeled to ensure conceptual coherence and representativeness of participants' lived experiences. Throughout the analytical process, themes were interpreted in relation to Self-Determination Theory to provide deeper understanding of teachers' motivation, instructional experiences, and professional resilience. Manual coding procedures, supported by systematic document organization, enhanced analytical transparency and consistency.

Reflexivity

Recognizing that qualitative inquiry is inherently interpretive, the researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the research process. As an educator interested in literacy development, the researcher acknowledged that personal beliefs and professional experiences could potentially influence data interpretation. To minimize researcher bias, reflexive journaling documented methodological decisions, emerging assumptions, and analytical reflections throughout data collection and analysis. Member checking, peer debriefing, and continuous comparison between participant narratives and thematic interpretations further strengthened the credibility and authenticity of the findings by ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review body prior to the commencement of data collection. The study adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Written informed consent was obtained from every participant after a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, expected benefits, and participants' rights. Participant anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms and identification codes in transcripts, reports, and publications. Digital recordings, interview transcripts, and research documents were securely stored in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the researcher. All personal information was managed in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any interview question or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Limitations and Rigor

The study is limited by its relatively small sample of eight elementary teachers drawn from four public elementary schools within one district. Consequently, the findings are intended to provide in-depth contextual understanding rather than broad statistical generalization. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the possibility of recall bias and subjective interpretation. Despite these limitations, methodological rigor was maintained through the trustworthiness framework of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and expert validation of the interview guide. Transferability was enhanced through rich descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics. Dependability was established by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting methodological decisions throughout the study, while confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, peer review, and systematic documentation of the analytical process. Collectively, these procedures ensured that the findings faithfully represented participants' lived experiences and satisfied accepted standards of qualitative research rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted with eight elementary teachers. The findings are organized according to the study's research questions and presented through major themes and supporting subthemes that capture the participants' lived experiences in literacy development. Each theme is supported by representative participant quotations, interpreted in relation to the existing literature, and discussed within the framework of Self-Determination Theory to provide a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and professional insights in literacy instruction.

Theme 1. Positive Experiences in Literacy Development

The analysis revealed that elementary teachers derive substantial professional fulfillment from witnessing learners' gradual progress in reading. Participants described how observing learners transition from struggling readers to confident and independent readers strengthened their commitment to literacy instruction despite numerous classroom challenges. One participant shared: "Seeing the joy and confidence of learners when they are finally able to read a sentence on their own. Then working with struggling readers and seeing gradual improvement through consistent practice and encouragement."

Similarly, another participant stated: "Seeing students who are non-readers who can gradually recognize letters and sounds, then confidently read their first words, is one of the most fulfilling moments in teaching literacy." (Participant 2)

These narratives indicate that teachers view learners' literacy growth not only as evidence of instructional success but also as a powerful source of professional motivation. Participants associated learners' increasing confidence with their own sense of teaching efficacy, encouraging them to remain committed to providing patient, consistent, and learner-centered instruction. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating that positive reading experiences and intrinsic motivation contribute significantly to literacy achievement and sustained engagement in reading (Becker et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Likewise, effective literacy instruction is strengthened when teachers employ responsive, evidence-based

instructional practices that address learners' individual needs and developmental differences (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2001). Viewed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, teachers' experiences reflect the fulfillment of competence and relatedness needs. Observing learners' progress reinforced teachers' sense of instructional competence while strengthening meaningful relationships with their learners, thereby sustaining intrinsic motivation for literacy instruction (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These findings suggest that literacy programs should recognize teachers' professional accomplishments and provide supportive environments that reinforce instructional motivation. Schools that celebrate learner progress while supporting teachers' professional growth are more likely to sustain effective literacy instruction and improve reading outcomes.

Theme 2. Personal Experiences Shape Instructional Practice

The findings revealed that teachers' classroom experiences significantly influenced the way they planned and delivered literacy instruction. Participants explained that years of teaching enabled them to recognize that learners possess varying reading abilities, learning styles, and instructional needs. Consequently, they became more patient, flexible, and intentional in selecting teaching strategies that promote meaningful literacy development. Participant 1 reflected on how classroom experiences transformed instructional practice: "When I see learners develop confidence as they improve in reading and writing, it has influenced me to use patience, supportive and engaging teaching strategies. It encouraged me to create meaningful learner-centered activities that address different learning needs." Similarly, Participant 7 emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction: "My experience helped me realize that learners have different learning styles and different reading levels. Some of those students are struggling learners, so I applied differentiated instruction for them."

These narratives demonstrate that teachers continuously refine their instructional approaches through experience and reflection. Rather than relying on uniform teaching methods, participants intentionally modified instructional materials, pacing, and learning activities according to learners' developmental needs. Such flexibility enabled teachers to create more inclusive literacy environments where struggling readers received appropriate instructional support while more advanced learners remained challenged. This finding supports previous research indicating that adaptive teaching enables educators to respond effectively to learners' diverse literacy needs by continuously adjusting instructional decisions based on classroom experiences (Vaughn, 2015). Likewise, literacy instruction requires teachers to balance curriculum expectations with responsive pedagogical practices that recognize learner diversity and promote equitable learning opportunities (Croninger & Valli, 2009). Furthermore, culturally informed literacy instruction encourages greater learner engagement by connecting instruction to students' backgrounds, experiences, and identities (Kelly et al., 2021). From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, participants demonstrated professional autonomy by selecting instructional approaches that best addressed learners' needs while strengthening their instructional competence through reflective practice (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Their experiences illustrate that effective literacy instruction is an evolving process requiring continuous adaptation rather than strict adherence to predetermined teaching procedures. These findings suggest that professional development programs should strengthen teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction, adaptive pedagogy, and culturally responsive literacy practices to address increasingly diverse classroom contexts.

Theme 3. Professional and Social Support Strengthens Literacy Instruction

The findings further revealed that teachers relied heavily on professional collaboration and social support in addressing literacy challenges. Participants consistently identified fellow teachers, school leaders, professional development activities, and parents as essential sources of instructional guidance and encouragement. These support systems enabled teachers to improve their instructional practices while sustaining confidence in literacy teaching. Participant 2 explained: "I found support from my fellow teachers, especially our Master Teacher, our School Head, and professional development activities like LAC sessions, webinars, trainings, and INSET. Through mentoring and sharing of strategies, I gained practical ideas for handling struggling readers." Participant 8 likewise emphasized the value of collaborative support: "When I faced difficulties in literacy instruction, I found support from my fellow teachers and school head. They shared helpful strategies and helped me improve my teaching methods. Parents were also a source of support because they assisted their children in practicing reading and writing at home."

These findings indicate that literacy instruction extends beyond individual classroom practice and is strengthened through collaborative professional relationships and meaningful family engagement. Teachers perceived collegial mentoring, professional learning communities, and continuous training as opportunities to exchange effective instructional strategies, solve classroom problems collectively, and strengthen their professional confidence. The findings are consistent with evidence demonstrating that professional learning communities enhance instructional quality by fostering collaborative inquiry, reflective practice, and shared responsibility for learner success (Vescio et al., 2008). Sustained professional development likewise improves teachers' instructional effectiveness when learning opportunities emphasize collaboration and practical classroom application (Desimone, 2009). More recently, evidence has shown that professional development in reading instruction significantly improves both teacher practice and student literacy outcomes (Rice et al., 2024). Participants also emphasized the importance of parental involvement in reinforcing literacy learning outside the classroom. Meaningful home-school partnerships provide learners with consistent literacy support and strengthen reading development through shared educational responsibility (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Cariaga et al., 2025). Viewed through Self-Determination Theory, collaborative relationships satisfy teachers' need for relatedness by fostering professional belonging, mutual support, and shared commitment to learner success (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These relationships contribute to teacher resilience and sustained instructional motivation despite classroom challenges. These findings imply that schools should institutionalize collaborative learning cultures by strengthening mentoring programs, professional learning communities, literacy coaching initiatives, and meaningful parent engagement programs to enhance literacy instruction and learner achievement.

Theme 4. Literacy as the Foundation of Learning

Another important finding revealed that teachers regarded literacy as the foundation of all academic learning. Participants consistently expressed that helping learners acquire reading and writing skills enables them to succeed across all subject areas and develop confidence as independent learners. Participant 1 explained: "I chose reading and literacy to teach because it is the foundation for all learning, and I find it rewarding to help learners discover the joy of reading."

Similarly, Participant 8 stated: "Reading and literacy is one of the most important foundations of a child's learning. Teaching literacy gives me the opportunity to help young learners build these basic skills that will support them in all other subjects." These responses demonstrate that participants viewed literacy instruction not as an isolated academic subject but as the essential foundation upon which learners construct knowledge throughout their educational journey. Teachers recognized that early literacy competence influences learners' academic confidence, comprehension abilities, and long-term educational success. This finding is supported by research indicating that systematic literacy instruction establishes the cognitive foundation necessary for reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and academic achievement across disciplines (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2001). Moreover, struggling readers require timely instructional support because early literacy difficulties often persist throughout later schooling if left unaddressed (Allington, 2013; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). These findings reinforce the importance of prioritizing literacy instruction within elementary education through sustained investment in teacher preparation, evidence-based reading interventions, and supportive instructional environments that ensure every learner develops foundational literacy competencies.

Theme 5. Challenges Encountered in Literacy Instruction

The analysis revealed that elementary teachers encountered numerous challenges that complicated literacy instruction. Despite their commitment to improving learners' reading abilities, participants consistently described difficulties related to diverse learner needs, inadequate instructional resources, limited parental support, low learner motivation, insufficient instructional time, and learners' short attention spans. These interconnected challenges required teachers to continuously modify instructional strategies while balancing curricular expectations and individual learner needs.

Diverse Learner Needs

The most frequently reported challenge involved addressing the varying literacy levels of learners within a single classroom. Participants explained that differences in reading ability, language proficiency, and learning pace made it difficult to deliver instruction that effectively addressed every learner's needs. Participant 1 shared: "Addressing the different reading levels of learners in one class is the most significant challenge I faced in literacy instruction. Some learners struggle in comprehension or language difficulties, which require extra time, patience, and strategies." Similarly, Participant 2 explained: "The wide differences in learners' reading levels, where some can already read fluently while others struggle with basic letter recognition and decoding, make differentiation essential but challenging."

These accounts demonstrate that literacy instruction is increasingly characterized by learner diversity, requiring teachers to simultaneously address beginning readers, struggling readers, and proficient readers within the same instructional period. Participants recognized differentiated instruction as essential but acknowledged that implementing individualized teaching strategies becomes increasingly difficult when classroom diversity is extensive. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing that literacy instruction requires continuous instructional adaptation to accommodate learners' varying developmental levels and educational needs (Croninger & Valli, 2009; Vaughn, 2015). Likewise, culturally informed and differentiated literacy instruction improves learner engagement by acknowledging students' individual backgrounds, abilities, and learning experiences (Kelly et al., 2021). Evidence further suggests that explicit and systematic literacy instruction is particularly beneficial for learners experiencing reading difficulties (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2001). From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, responding effectively to diverse learner needs requires teachers to exercise professional autonomy while maintaining confidence in their instructional competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). However, extensive learner diversity may also increase instructional demands, potentially affecting teachers' motivation and perceived effectiveness when adequate institutional support is unavailable. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction while ensuring schools provide sufficient instructional resources and professional support to address increasingly diverse literacy classrooms.

Inadequate Instructional Resources and Limited Parental Support

Another major challenge identified by participants was the limited availability of instructional materials and inconsistent parental involvement in learners' literacy development. Teachers explained that shortages of reading materials and limited home support often reduced learners' opportunities to practice reading outside the classroom. Participant 8 stated: "Parents were not always able to support their children's reading at home. Some learners had very little practice outside school, so it became difficult to reinforce literacy lessons." Likewise, Participant 1 noted: "Limited instructional materials also make literacy instruction more difficult because teachers need to prepare additional resources to meet learners' needs."

These findings indicate that literacy development extends beyond classroom instruction and is influenced by the availability of learning resources and meaningful family participation. Teachers emphasized that while they could provide structured literacy instruction during school hours, sustained learner improvement depended largely on opportunities for continued reading practice at home. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that meaningful parental engagement strengthens children's literacy development by extending learning beyond the classroom (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Cariaga et al., 2025). Likewise, struggling readers benefit from consistent instructional support supported by appropriate reading materials and evidence-based interventions (Allington, 2013). Educational leadership and instructional supervision also contribute to improved learner outcomes by ensuring that teachers receive adequate instructional assistance and resources (Saro et al., 2025). These findings suggest that literacy programs should strengthen home-school partnerships while improving schools' access to high-quality literacy materials. Collaborative literacy

initiatives involving parents, teachers, and school leaders may provide more sustainable support for learners experiencing reading difficulties.

Low Learner Motivation and Limited Reading Exposure

Participants also identified learner motivation as an important challenge affecting literacy instruction. Many teachers observed that some learners demonstrated limited interest in reading activities, particularly those who had previously experienced reading difficulties or had minimal exposure to reading materials outside school. Participant 6 explained: "Some learners easily lose interest in reading activities because they lack confidence and have limited opportunities to practice reading at home." Participant 8 similarly observed: "Children learn best when lessons are enjoyable, but some learners have very limited exposure to books and reading activities before entering school."

These responses indicate that learner motivation is closely associated with confidence, prior literacy experiences, and access to supportive reading environments. Teachers recognized that motivating reluctant readers required creativity, encouragement, and engaging instructional approaches capable of sustaining learner participation. The findings are consistent with evidence demonstrating that intrinsic reading motivation significantly predicts literacy achievement and long-term reading engagement (Becker et al., 2010). Self-Determination Theory likewise explains that learners become more motivated when classroom environments satisfy their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Teachers therefore play a crucial role in creating supportive literacy environments that encourage learners to participate actively in reading activities. These findings underscore the need for literacy programs that simultaneously develop reading skills and cultivate positive attitudes toward reading through engaging, learner-centered instructional experiences.

Insufficient Instructional Time and Learners' Short Attention Span

Teachers further reported that limited instructional time and learners' short attention spans constrained the delivery of effective literacy instruction. Participants explained that balancing curriculum requirements with individualized literacy support often left insufficient time to address the needs of struggling readers adequately. Participant 7 shared: "There is not always enough time to give every learner the individual attention needed, especially those who require additional reading practice." Another participant added: "Young learners have short attention spans, so maintaining their focus throughout literacy activities is often challenging." These findings suggest that literacy instruction involves balancing instructional quality with practical classroom realities. Teachers frequently adjusted lesson pacing, incorporated interactive learning activities, and provided varied instructional experiences to maintain learner engagement despite time constraints. Research similarly indicates that effective literacy instruction requires flexible teaching approaches supported by continuous formative assessment and timely instructional feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Moreover, adaptive teaching enables educators to maximize limited instructional time while responding to learners' changing needs (Vaughn, 2015). Overall, the challenges identified by participants demonstrate that literacy instruction is influenced by multiple classroom, school, and family factors rather than by instructional practices alone. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts involving teachers, school leaders, parents, and educational policymakers to create supportive learning environments that promote equitable literacy development for all learners.

Theme 6. Coping Mechanisms Employed by Elementary Teachers

The analysis revealed that elementary teachers employed various coping mechanisms to address the challenges of literacy instruction. Despite experiencing diverse learner needs, limited instructional resources, and time constraints, participants demonstrated resilience by adopting differentiated instruction, engaging in professional collaboration, participating in continuous professional development, utilizing research-based interventions, and fostering partnerships with parents. These adaptive practices enabled teachers to sustain effective literacy instruction while responding to the evolving needs of their learners.

Differentiated and Adaptive Instruction

The most frequently reported coping strategy was the use of differentiated and adaptive instructional approaches. Participants explained that modifying teaching strategies according to learners' reading abilities, interests, and learning styles enabled them to provide more meaningful literacy experiences. Participant 7 explained: "Learners have different learning styles and different reading levels. Some are struggling readers, so I apply differentiated instruction to help them learn better." Similarly, Participant 8 stated: "I focus on using interactive strategies such as storytelling, songs, phonics games, and visual materials because children learn best when lessons are engaging, simple, and enjoyable."

These narratives indicate that teachers recognized instructional flexibility as essential for addressing learner diversity. Rather than applying a single teaching approach, participants adjusted instructional materials, classroom activities, and learning experiences to accommodate learners' individual needs and developmental readiness. This finding aligns with studies demonstrating that adaptive teaching enhances literacy development by enabling teachers to modify instruction according to learners' progress and individual characteristics (Vaughn, 2015). Likewise, differentiated literacy instruction supports equitable learning opportunities by providing appropriate levels of challenge and instructional support for diverse learners (Kelly et al., 2021). Evidence also suggests that systematic and explicit literacy instruction significantly improves reading outcomes, particularly among struggling readers (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2001). Viewed through Self-Determination Theory, differentiated instruction reflects teachers' professional autonomy and competence as they make informed instructional decisions that maximize learners' literacy development (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These adaptive practices demonstrate teachers' commitment to creating inclusive learning environments despite classroom challenges. These findings suggest that schools should strengthen teachers' competencies in differentiated literacy instruction through sustained professional development and access to evidence-based instructional resources.

Professional Collaboration and Continuous Professional Development

Participants consistently identified collaboration with colleagues and participation in professional learning activities as important coping mechanisms for improving literacy instruction. Teachers explained that exchanging ideas with fellow educators and attending seminars, workshops, and Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions enhanced their instructional competence and confidence. Participant 2 shared: "I found support from fellow teachers, our Master Teacher, School Head, LAC sessions, webinars, trainings, and INSET. Sharing strategies helped me improve my teaching of struggling readers."

Participant 5 likewise stated: "I received support from fellow teachers, Master Teachers, school administrators, and through trainings and seminars." These accounts demonstrate that collaborative professional learning provided teachers with practical strategies for addressing classroom challenges while strengthening their confidence in literacy instruction. Participants valued opportunities to learn from experienced colleagues and to reflect collectively on effective teaching practices. The findings support evidence indicating that professional learning communities strengthen instructional quality through collaborative inquiry, reflective dialogue, and shared professional responsibility (Vescio et al., 2008). Similarly, sustained professional development is more likely to improve instructional practice when teachers actively engage in collaborative learning experiences focused on classroom application (Desimone, 2009). Recent evidence further confirms that reading-focused professional development positively influences both teacher practice and learner achievement (Rice et al., 2024). These findings indicate that educational institutions should invest in sustained professional development, structured mentoring programs, and collaborative learning communities that promote continuous instructional improvement in literacy education.

Research-Based Literacy Interventions

Another important coping mechanism involved teachers' use of research-based literacy interventions to support struggling readers. Participants reported consulting educational research and implementing evidence-based reading approaches to improve learners' literacy performance. Participant 6 explained: "I searched for research on how to help learners with reading difficulties. I learned about the Marungko Approach, the ARAL Program, and CRLA to support struggling readers." This response illustrates teachers' willingness to seek evidence-informed solutions rather than relying solely on personal experience. Participants recognized that research-based instructional approaches strengthened their capacity to respond effectively to learners experiencing reading difficulties. The finding is supported by evidence emphasizing the importance of systematic reading interventions and explicit literacy instruction in improving reading proficiency among struggling learners (Ehri et al., 2001; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Likewise, ongoing professional learning enables teachers to integrate current research findings into classroom practice and improve instructional decision-making (Rice et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of strengthening teachers' research literacy and ensuring access to validated literacy interventions that promote evidence-based instructional practices.

Building Partnerships with Parents

Teachers also identified parental involvement as an essential coping mechanism that reinforced literacy instruction beyond the classroom. Participants emphasized that learners demonstrated greater improvement when parents regularly supported reading activities at home. Participant 8 stated: "Parents were also a source of support. By communicating with them and encouraging them to assist their children in practicing reading and writing at home, learners received reinforcement outside the classroom." Participants believed that effective communication with parents promoted shared responsibility for learners' literacy development. Home-based reading practice complemented classroom instruction and strengthened learners' confidence and reading fluency. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating that meaningful parental engagement strengthens children's literacy development through supportive home learning environments (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). More recent evidence likewise emphasizes that culturally responsive parental involvement contributes to more inclusive educational practices and improved learner outcomes (Cariaga et al., 2025). From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, collaboration between teachers and parents strengthens learners' sense of relatedness by creating consistent educational support across home and school environments (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Such partnerships contribute to sustained learner motivation and more effective literacy development. The analysis revealed that participants developed valuable professional insights through their experiences in literacy instruction. Teachers viewed literacy as a holistic and lifelong learning process that extends beyond teaching learners to recognize letters and words. They emphasized the importance of early intervention, learner-centered instruction, meaningful relationships, continuous professional growth, and active family involvement in promoting successful literacy development. These reflections demonstrate how teachers transformed classroom experiences into practical knowledge that informed and strengthened their instructional practices.

Literacy Development as a Holistic Process

Participants consistently described literacy as a comprehensive process that involves cognitive, emotional, and social development. They emphasized that effective literacy instruction should not focus solely on decoding and word recognition but should also cultivate learners' confidence, comprehension, communication skills, and enjoyment of reading. Participant 6 shared: "The learners developed love in reading when they gained confidence as readers, successfully used learning strategies, and improved their participation and confidence." Similarly, Participant 8 explained: "Children learn best when lessons are engaging, simple, and enjoyable. Storytelling, songs, pictures, and games help learners recognize letters, sounds, and words more easily." These narratives indicate that literacy development is strengthened when instructional practices address learners' academic, emotional, and motivational needs simultaneously. Participants believed that enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences encourage learners to participate actively in literacy activities while developing confidence as emerging readers. This finding supports contemporary literacy research emphasizing that effective literacy instruction integrates decoding, language development, comprehension, learner motivation, and meaningful classroom engagement (Castles et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2021). Likewise, intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in sustaining learners' reading

engagement and literacy achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Becker et al., 2010). These findings suggest that literacy programs should promote holistic instructional approaches that develop both learners' literacy competencies and their motivation to become lifelong readers.

Early Intervention and Learner-Centered Instruction

Participants emphasized that identifying learners' reading difficulties at an early stage enables teachers to provide timely instructional support before literacy gaps become more pronounced. Teachers explained that continuous monitoring, individualized instruction, and consistent practice contribute significantly to learners' reading improvement. Participant 1 reflected: "Working with struggling readers and seeing gradual improvement through consistent practice and encouragement has been one of my most meaningful experiences." Participant 3 similarly stated: "Seeing students who struggled with reading become confident readers through continuous guidance and practice is one of my greatest achievements as a teacher." These findings indicate that teachers recognize early intervention as an essential component of successful literacy instruction. Rather than waiting for learners to fall significantly behind, participants intentionally provided additional support through individualized instruction and continuous reading practice. The findings align with evidence demonstrating that early identification of reading difficulties and systematic intervention significantly improve literacy outcomes among struggling readers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Ehri et al., 2001). Likewise, Allington (2013) emphasized that struggling readers require sustained instructional support, meaningful reading opportunities, and responsive teaching practices to achieve reading success. These findings imply that schools should strengthen early literacy screening, intervention programs, and continuous progress monitoring to ensure that learners experiencing reading difficulties receive timely instructional support.

Teacher Identity and Professional Commitment

Participants viewed themselves not only as classroom teachers but also as facilitators of learners' lifelong literacy development. Despite numerous instructional challenges, they remained committed to helping every learner develop the ability and confidence to read. Participant 5 shared: "Seeing students learn how to read and understand stories gives me great satisfaction as a teacher." Participant 4 likewise stated: "My experiences helped me become more patient and creative in teaching reading and writing." These responses demonstrate that teachers' professional identity is closely connected to learners' literacy success. Participants viewed learners' reading progress as both a professional achievement and a personal source of fulfillment, strengthening their commitment to continuous instructional improvement. This finding is supported by research indicating that teachers' professional efficacy, emotional well-being, and instructional commitment positively influence classroom learning and student achievement (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Moreover, sustained professional development enables teachers to strengthen instructional competence while adapting to changing educational demands (Desimone, 2009; Rice et al., 2024). Viewed through Self-Determination Theory, participants' experiences illustrate how competence, autonomy, and meaningful relationships sustain teachers' intrinsic motivation despite challenging instructional contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These findings suggest that educational institutions should prioritize teacher well-being, instructional autonomy, and continuous professional learning to strengthen literacy instruction and teacher retention.

Family Engagement as a Shared Responsibility

Teachers consistently emphasized that literacy development extends beyond classroom instruction and requires meaningful collaboration between schools and families. Participants believed that learners demonstrated greater confidence and reading improvement when parents actively reinforced literacy activities at home. Participant 8 explained: "When parents help their children practice reading simple words or writing letters at home, learners become more confident in class. This partnership between teachers and parents strengthens literacy development." These findings indicate that effective literacy development is strengthened through collaborative partnerships that provide learners with consistent learning opportunities across home and school settings. Participants viewed parents as essential educational partners rather than passive observers of learners' academic progress. The finding supports previous studies showing that meaningful parental engagement enhances children's literacy achievement and strengthens home-school relationships (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Similarly, culturally responsive parental involvement promotes inclusive educational practices and contributes to improved learner outcomes (Cariaga et al., 2025). These findings suggest that schools should develop sustainable parent engagement initiatives that empower families to participate actively in learners' literacy development through home-based reading activities and continuous communication with teachers.

Overall, the insights shared by participants demonstrate that successful literacy instruction is grounded in learner-centered pedagogy, early intervention, professional commitment, evidence-based instructional practices, and meaningful collaboration among teachers, parents, and school leaders. Collectively, these findings reinforce the view that improving literacy outcomes requires coordinated educational support systems that recognize both the instructional and relational dimensions of literacy development. By strengthening teacher capacity, promoting family engagement, and sustaining supportive learning environments, schools can create conditions that enable all learners to develop foundational literacy skills necessary for lifelong learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of elementary teachers in developing learners' literacy in selected public elementary schools in the Nabunturan East District, Davao de Oro. The findings revealed that literacy instruction is a complex and dynamic process shaped by diverse learner needs, limited instructional resources, insufficient instructional time, varying learner motivation, and inconsistent parental involvement. Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience by adopting differentiated instruction, utilizing research-informed teaching strategies, engaging in continuous professional learning, collaborating with colleagues, and establishing meaningful partnerships with parents. These adaptive practices enabled teachers to sustain effective literacy instruction while responding to the unique needs of

their learners. The study further established that literacy development extends beyond teaching learners to decode written texts. Teachers emphasized the importance of fostering learners' confidence, motivation, comprehension, and engagement through learner-centered and flexible instructional approaches. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, the findings illustrate that teachers' competence, autonomy, and collaborative relationships contribute significantly to sustaining instructional commitment despite challenging classroom conditions. By documenting teachers' lived experiences within a local public-school context, the study contributes valuable qualitative evidence that may inform literacy instruction, teacher professional development, and educational policy aimed at improving literacy outcomes in Philippine elementary schools.

School administrators and the Department of Education should strengthen school-based literacy programs by providing adequate instructional resources, expanding access to evidence-based literacy interventions, and institutionalizing sustained professional development focused on differentiated instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, formative assessment, and early literacy intervention. Schools should likewise reinforce professional learning communities, mentoring programs, and instructional supervision to encourage collaborative learning, reflective practice, and continuous instructional improvement among teachers. Equally important, educational institutions should promote teacher well-being by creating supportive working environments that strengthen teachers' motivation, professional autonomy, and instructional competence. Teachers are encouraged to continue implementing learner-centered and differentiated literacy instruction while utilizing research-based strategies that address learners' diverse reading needs. Stronger partnerships between schools and families should also be established by encouraging parents to actively participate in home-based reading activities and maintaining regular communication with teachers regarding learners' literacy progress. Future researchers may replicate this study using larger and more diverse participant groups, different educational settings, or mixed-methods research designs to generate broader evidence on literacy development and to further examine factors influencing teachers' instructional practices and learners' reading achievement.

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