Aspiring to Inspire: Unveiling Experiences of Early Childhood Teachers

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Abstract: This study explored their lived experiences, coping strategies, and the insights derived from these experiences to inform future educational practices and policies. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to capture the depth of participants' experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDI) with seven educators and focus group discussions (FGD) with three participants. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and develop key themes. Findings revealed significant challenges faced by educators, such as working with scarce materials, managing overwhelming workloads, and addressing the emotional toll of the profession. Coping strategies included adapting through resourcefulness, implementing time management strategies, seeking professional development and collaboration, practicing self-care and peer support, engaging in reflective practice, and joining professional networks and association. Insights emphasized educators' resilience and the need for systemic changes to enhance their roles and improve educational outcomes. The study highlights the importance of addressing systemic issues in early childhood education by providing adequate resources, professional development, and institutional support. It also underscores the role of collective advocacy in empowering educators and promoting quality education. Future directions include targeted training for teachers, policy reforms for better resource allocation, and further research on teacher well-being and instructional practices.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education, Educator Challenges, Reflective Practice, Teacher Advocacy, Professional Development.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding why individuals chose early childhood education as a profession was essential to improving the quality of care and education for young children. This exploration revealed the driving motivations, aspirations, and challenges encountered by educators in various international, national, and local contexts, emphasizing their vital role in laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

Globally and locally, early childhood education (ECE) faced increasing demand but continued to struggle with low wages, limited professional development, and lack of recognition. These challenges hindered the recruitment and retention of qualified educators, affecting the quality of programs. In the Philippines, especially in rural and urban areas like Davao City, obstacles such as insufficient government support, funding disparities, lack of trained teachers, and inadequate facilities persisted. Despite these issues, the dedication of early childhood educators remained strong, underscoring the need to understand their motivations and to address systemic barriers in order to ensure all children receive quality early education.

This study aimed to explore the motivations and aspirations behind individuals choosing early childhood education (ECE) as a profession. By uncovering these driving factors, the research sought to address retention issues and enhance the quality of ECE services, ultimately informing policies and practices that benefit educators and young learners alike.

The literature review emphasized that inspiring students involves a blend of factors, including strong teacher-student relationships, motivational strategies, and the presence of role models. It also highlighted the role of social-emotional learning and positive psychology in supporting students' overall well-being and development, showing how individual, relational, and contextual elements work together to promote academic and personal success.

This study was guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). SDT emphasized that students were motivated when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were met, helping them develop intrinsic motivation and greater engagement in learning. SCCT highlighted how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal interests influenced students' career choices. Together, these theories offered insight into how educators could support students' motivation and career development through appropriate environments and interventions.

II. METHOD

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of early childhood educators in relation to their career choices. This approach aimed to uncover the underlying meanings, motivations, and personal perspectives influencing their decisions, offering rich insights into their professional journeys.

This study is grounded in key philosophical assumptions that guide its qualitative approach to exploring early childhood educators' career decisions. Ontologically, it adopts a social constructionist perspective, recognizing that reality is shaped through social interactions and individual perceptions. Epistemologically, it embraces qualitative inquiry, emphasizing that knowledge is co-constructed and context-specific, derived from participants' lived experiences. Axiologically, the study upholds ethical principles such as respect, empathy, and integrity, valuing participants' voices and safeguarding their dignity. Methodologically, it follows a constructivist framework, where meaning is collaboratively built through reflective engagement, iterative data analysis, and participant validation, ensuring the authenticity and credibility of the research findings.

This study is guided by the qualitative assumption that meaning is constructed through individuals' subjective interpretations within social contexts. It emphasizes understanding early childhood educators' lived experiences, perceptions, and motivations to uncover the complex and diverse factors influencing their career decisions.

This study used purposive sampling to select participants for in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, targeting early childhood educators with at least five years of experience and diverse backgrounds. Originally, seven interviewees were identified, but one withdrew, leaving six, which was sufficient as data saturation had been reached. For the focus group, three participants with varied experiences were chosen to encourage rich discussions. This sampling ensured relevant and insightful contributions aligned with the study's objectives.

This study used in-depth interviews (IDIs) and a focus group discussion (FGD) to explore early childhood educators' career decision-making. IDIs allowed for one-on-one, detailed insights, while the FGD encouraged interactive discussion of shared experiences. Both used a semi-structured guide with open-ended questions to ensure consistency and flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives.

The researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to interpret the data. She began by transcribing and reading the interviews to become deeply familiar with the content. Then, she created initial codes to highlight significant ideas and grouped them to identify recurring themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to capture key patterns in participants' experiences regarding career decisions in early childhood education.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first section outlined key themes from early childhood educators' lived experiences, revealing the challenges they faced daily, such as limited resources, heavy workloads, emotional stress, instructional adjustments, identity formation, and their efforts to advocate for recognition and quality in their profession. These offered a deeper understanding of the complex realities shaping their career paths and professional decisions.

The second section revealed the various coping strategies used by early childhood educators to manage professional challenges, such as being resourceful, managing time effectively, engaging in continuous learning, practicing self-care, reflecting on their practices, and connecting with professional networks—actions that supported their resilience and sustained their well-being.

The third section presented the educators' insights gained through their personal interactions with young children, highlighting their growing understanding of children's needs, interests, and potential, which helped them shape more responsive and child-centered teaching approaches.

The study revealed key challenges faced by early childhood educators, including limited access to materials, heavy workloads, the need to adjust instruction for diverse developmental levels, and emotional strain from their responsibilities. Additionally, they struggled to establish a strong professional identity in a field that is often undervalued by society, shedding light on broader systemic issues that affect their day-to-day work and well-being.

To cope with these challenges, educators used various strategies such as resourcefulness with recycled materials, effective time management, participation in professional development, collaboration with peers, and engagement in self-care and reflective practices. They also joined professional networks to support advocacy efforts for improved recognition and resources in the early childhood education sector.

These findings highlight the resilience and creativity of early childhood educators. Despite the challenges, they remained committed to providing quality education, showing adaptability and dedication. The study emphasizes the need for systemic reforms, enhanced support structures, and increased recognition of educators' contributions to promote their professional growth and well-being.

The study underscored the demanding nature of early childhood education and the systemic challenges educators face, such as limited resources, administrative burdens, and lack of recognition. Despite these obstacles, educators demonstrated resilience through adaptive coping strategies like professional development and peer collaboration. Addressing these issues through systemic reforms, institutional support, and collective advocacy is essential to

empower educators and ensure quality early learning experiences.

The study emphasized the importance of continuous professional development for teachers, encouraging training tailored to their specific needs, such as resource innovation, time management, and reflective practices. It promoted active participation in networks and advocacy groups to foster collaboration and influence reforms. The study also highlighted the need for equitable access to resources, differentiated instruction, and inclusive learning environments. School leaders were urged to create supportive workplaces by streamlining administrative tasks, promoting teamwork, and offering wellness programs, while policymakers were encouraged to prioritize funding for early childhood education. Further research was recommended on the long-term effects of teacher coping strategies, systemic support, and professional networks on educators' identity and retention.

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