EPRA International Journal of Environmental Economics, Commerce and Educational Management
Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra0414 |ISI I.F Value: 0.815|SJIF Impact Factor (2025): 8.57 ISSN: 2348 – 814X
Volume: 12 | Issue:7 |July 2025

BUILDING CHARACTER OF YOUNG LEARNERS: STRATEGIES OF PRIMARY GRADE TEACHERS IN EDUKASYON SA PAGPAPAKATAO (ESP)

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra23430
DOI No: 10.36713/epra23430

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the instructional strategies and challenges faced by primary grade teachers in implementing Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (ESP) to build character among young learners. Twelve (12) teacher-participants from a public elementary school in Panabo City Division were involved in this study. Through thematic analysis of teacher-participants' experiences, two key challenge themes emerged: the negative influence of external environments and lack of parental and community support in reinforcing values education. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated effective strategies through modeling and demonstration of values and integration of moral lessons across classroom activities, which helped cultivate character development among students. To address these challenges, the study strongly recommends fortifying home-school partnerships to align values reinforcement and strengthening the modeling and integration of values in ESP instruction. The findings highlighted the need for systemic support through teacher training programs, curriculum enhancements in the MATATAG framework, and stronger school-community collaboration. By implementing these measures, schools can transform character education from isolated classroom lessons into a comprehensive, community-supported practice, ensuring more effective moral development for young learners and a more valuesoriented educational environment

KEYWORDS: *Character Education; Edukasyon Sa Pagpapakatao; ESP; Values Formation; Primary Education; Teaching Strategies.*

INTRODUCTION

Building the character of young learners is important in schools. Along with reading, writing, and math, schools teach students about integrity, respect, responsibility, fairness, honesty, caring, and citizenship. Building the character of learners strengthens the social fabric of the school and community. Character building involves shaping inner qualities and behavior. It's about developing strong moral values, making principled decisions, and acting ethically in all aspects of life.

Building character involves guiding individuals to become emotionally stronger and more self-reliant in handling challenges. The cultivation of character is a deliberate process aimed at fostering emotional resilience and self-reliance in addressing challenges. In the educational sphere, the role of schools in character building of learners is crucial. While academic achievements and professional accomplishments have their place, Istafa (2023) contended that character determines the foundation on which those achievements rest.

In the global context, educators express concern regarding the process of character building. In Indonesia, Farhatilwardah, Hastuti, & Krisnatuti (2019) had identified a lack of parental involvement in fostering the character development of students. The prevailing notion that parents bear sole responsibility for instilling behavioral values while underestimating the role of schools in this regard is noteworthy. Consequently, it is crucial to acknowledge that, while schools provide secondary education, parents play a primary role in shaping a child's character.

Moreover, the effort to building the character of learners is a challenge to educators. Shrotri (2020) talks about how liberalization and globalization have made Indians more influenced by Western culture and all the commercial stuff. Everyone's always competing, and with both parents working in modern nuclear families, kids are left on their own. They're not getting the values they need from their parents because everyone thinks schools and colleges will teach them everything.

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In the Philippines, the teaching of character education through Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (EsP) also faced some challenges. Given the limited time for values education, which is one hour twice a week, students are only given this schedule to learn about values in their values class. Riego (2023) posits that students nowadays frequently skip this subject's class. Some teachers place more emphasis on grades of students rather than evaluating them as a whole to determine whether they are prepared to face life's ups and downs.

In our locality, particularly in the Panabo City Division, I have noticed the increasing concern of students' misbehavior. The issues of bullying, the lack of social responsibility and environmental consciousness are some of the evident misdemeanor of students that must have been corrected through Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao. Moreover, teachers of ESP are not expert to the field of values education since it's not their major of specialization. Teachers grapples on trying effective strategies to teach the subject. It is in this premise that the researcher endeavors to unfold the strategies of ESP teachers in building the young learners' character.

Notwithstanding the effort of Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (ESP) teachers, there remains a problem of learners' misbehavior in schools and the laments of poor implementation in EsP subject in the field. This study is of extreme necessity to address the gaps on the effort to building the desirable character of learners in schools. Intrinsically, the social significance of this study to contribute knowledge in making the Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (ESP) curriculum more responsive, relevant and effective in honing value-driven Filipino citizen to contribute in building a better nation.

REVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT LITERATURE

The effective implementation of school policies is central to ensuring quality education, as these policies serve as structured frameworks that shape both teaching practices and professional standards within the educational system. School policies guide decision-making processes, provide consistency across classrooms, and establish expectations for both student learning outcomes and teacher conduct. In elementary schools, where foundational knowledge and values are formed, policy implementation is particularly important in influencing the development of teacher competencies, ethical practices, and time management. However, the practical application of these policies can vary greatly depending on institutional support, clarity of guidelines, and available resources, especially in regions facing educational disparities.

Globally, educational institutions grapple with policy implementation challenges. Studies have shown that policy effectiveness is often compromised by inconsistent application, lack of contextual relevance, and inadequate communication between policymakers and practitioners. Davidson and Kvist (2020) highlight that in both developed and developing countries, educators often struggle with vague policy directives and insufficient resources, which impede their ability to fully meet expectations. Similarly, Fernández-López et al. (2021) observed that in various European nations, disparities in educational outcomes are frequently linked to uneven policy enforcement and fragmented support systems. These global patterns emphasize the need for robust mechanisms that support teachers in translating policies into meaningful practices within their classrooms.

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education (DepEd) has long recognized the importance of establishing clear and comprehensive school policies to promote professional standards and enhance instructional delivery. Numerous policies have been introduced to regulate teacher behavior, promote ethical standards, and improve classroom performance. However, despite the existence of such frameworks, many educators face obstacles in their implementation. According to Perante-Calina (2019), challenges such as limited training opportunities, resource constraints, and lack of continuous professional development hinder the successful integration of these policies into everyday teaching practices. Navarro (2020) further emphasizes that without consistent policy orientation and adequate support, educators may struggle to meet professional expectations, resulting in inconsistencies in educational quality and teacher performance across regions.

Specifically, in the Davao Oriental Division, the implementation of school policies in elementary education presents unique challenges and opportunities. While school policies are designed to foster equitable, effective learning environments, local contexts significantly influence their success. Many elementary school teachers in the region report difficulties in understanding and complying with policy mandates due to limited administrative guidance, lack of professional development initiatives, and resource shortages. As noted by Lopez and Macas (2021), local government support and clear policy communication play a significant role in facilitating or hindering policy implementation. Therefore, understanding how these local dynamics affect teacher professionalism is essential for improving educational delivery in the area.

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A key factor affecting policy implementation is clarity. Teachers must be well-informed about policy objectives and operational procedures to align their practices with institutional goals. Calleja (2020) notes that when policies are vague or poorly communicated, teachers often experience confusion and frustration, which undermines their engagement and ability to implement reforms effectively. This is particularly relevant in Davao Oriental, where elementary teachers are expected to uphold specific core competencies, demonstrate ethical conduct, and manage their time effectively amidst growing instructional demands. Without a structured framework for interpreting and applying policy guidelines, teachers may struggle to meet these expectations.

Another critical factor is the level of institutional support available for teachers. Banegas and Betti (2021) found that professional development, administrative backing, and access to learning materials significantly impact a teacher's capacity to comply with school policies. In Davao Oriental, gaps in support mechanisms—such as limited mentorship, insufficient training opportunities, and inconsistent monitoring—often lead to variations in teacher performance and morale. These constraints affect not only teachers' professional growth but also their capacity to create effective learning environments that align with national educational goals.

Given these issues, there is a pressing need to examine how school policy implementation influences teacher professionalism in the Davao Oriental Division. This study seeks to explore the relationship between school policy implementation and key indicators of teacher professionalism, including core competencies, ethical conduct, and time management. It aims to assess the clarity of policies, the extent of support provided to ensure compliance, and how these factors impact teachers' ability to maintain professional standards.

By focusing on the local realities of policy implementation in Davao Oriental, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how educational policies translate into practice within diverse and resource-constrained settings. The findings are expected to inform future policy improvements, enhance teacher support systems, and ultimately promote higher standards of professionalism and educational equity within the region.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the pursuit of unfolding the lived-experiences the participants in building the desirable character of learners through Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao, the following are the research questions to guide the inquiry:

1. What are the challenges of primary grade teachers in building the character of young learners?
2. What are the strategies of primary grade teachers in building the character of young learners through Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao?
3. What educational management insights can be drawn to enrich character education?

In general, this phenomenological inquiry is beneficial to all stakeholders in the academic institutions. In particular, the following are the immediate beneficiaries of the study:

Department of Education. Persistent to the desire of ensuring the effective implementation of Values Education in schools, this study is a significant reference for policy formulation that may further fortify value formation in the curriculum.

School Administrators. This study is significant for school administrators as they exercise their instructional leadership role. The findings of this study may serve as reference in crafting continues development program to further capacitate teachers in the field of character building of the learners.

Teachers. Educators are also part of the major machinery of progress. They have the power to influence learners' holistic development. Who and what they become in the future depends largely from all the teaching ideologies they have imparted and how these ideologies manifest once learners go out in the real world. The findings of the study are significant in their planning and implementation of effective and relevant curriculum in values education.
Students. As the ultimate beneficially in the educative process, this study may widen the perspectives of the students especially in building their desirable Filipino values.

To fully understand the terms used in this study, the following are the defined operationally:
Character building. This to the process and the effort of molding or shaping the character of learners with desirable Filipino values.

Young learners. It refers to the primary grade learners or the grade 1 to grade 3 level learners who undergo the values education or the Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao subject.

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Primary grade teachers. Refer to the teachers in the elementary level who handle the kinder to grade 3 learners. In the context of this study, the primary grade teachers, who are research participants, are those teaching grade 1 to grade 3 learners.

Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao. It is one of the learning areas in the k to 12 curriculum, is taught thirty (30) minutes per day or one hundred fifty (150) minutes per week in the elementary. It aims to impart to the students love of the world, and promotes active citizenry to maintain the political structures and laws that stabilizes human plurality and spontaneity (Miranda,2016)

METHODOLOGY

This chapter delineates the methodologies and procedures to be employed in this study. It comprehensively addresses various aspects of the research method, including philosophical assumptions, qualitative orientation, research design, research participants, ethical considerations, the researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, and the credibility of the study.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

This study will employ qualitative phenomenology research design. Phenomenology attempts to extract the most pure and untainted data. Phenomenology, as a research design, centers on comprehending the shared lived experiences within specific groups and examining the influence of a phenomenon on individuals to unveil the significance they assign to it. Its focal point is the observation of factual occurrences and features. As cited in Tomaszewski et al. (2020), Flood (2010) notes that the phenomenological approach to qualitative research concentrates on the fundamental elements of a lived experience or phenomenon, which can be perceived or felt by individuals from diverse perspectives.

In the course of a phenomenological study, the informants engaged in discussions regarding their observations and experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher utilized in-depth interviews and focus group discussions as the primary method for gathering information. As posited by Smith et al. (2009) as cited in Alase (2017), the primary objective of conducting interviews in phenomenological inquiry is to facilitate an interaction that enables participants to articulate their personal narratives in their own words. Meanwhile, focus group discussion according to Lune and Berg (2017) as cited in Tumen, Akyildiz and Ahmed (2021) would be a useful attempt to have participants with common experiences together to examine a particular subject of interest, and it is known as an effective way to gather knowledge from all kinds of people.

RESEARCH RESPONDENTS

The lived experiences of EsP teachers in building the character of the primary grade learners is the focus of this study. In gathering information data, this study will involve the twelve (12) teacher-participants from a public elementary school in Panabo City Division. The participants are primary grade teachers from small, medium and large schools of the Panabo division. They have at least three (3) years of teaching experience in Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao.

In the selection of participants this study employs purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, as explained by Palinkas, et al. (2015), is a widely used and popular method in qualitative research for identifying and selecting data-rich cases that are relevant to the phenomenon of interest. As to the number of participants, Creswell (2013) as cited in Sarfo, et.al (2021) stresses that five to twenty-five participants are adequate for phenomenological studies by. Although small sample sizes are common in phenomenological studies, it is essential to emphasize that the researcher may need to keep adding individuals until saturation to fulfil the study's goal. The 12 participants therefore fits to the criterion.

FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS

According to Braun and Clark (2006) methods of qualitative data analysis fall in two groups. The first group consists of methods driven by an epistemological or theoretical position, which have limited variability in how they are applied within their frameworks, such as conversation analysis (CA) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and methods which are situated within a broad theoretical framework and can therefore be used in a variety of ways within those frameworks , such as grounded theory (GT), discourse analysis (DA) narrative analysis (NA).

The second group includes methods independent of theory and epistemology, which can be applied across a range of different theoretical and epistemological approaches and are therefore very flexible. One such method is

thematic analysis, which through the theoretical freedom "provides flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun and Clark, 2006).

This study employed qualitative research method. Rigorous and systematic steps were observed in analyzing the information gathered from the teacher-participants. Data were analyzed following the steps outlined by O'connor and Gibson (2003) on qualitative data analysis:

Organizing the Data. Data are organized in a way that is easy to look at and that allows the researcher to go through each topic to pick out concepts and themes.

Finding and Organizing Ideas and Concepts. Find specific words or ideas keep coming up then organize these ideas into codes or categories

Building Over-Arching Themes in the Data. Each of the response categories has one or more associated themes that give a deeper meaning to the data. Different categories can be collapsed under one main over-arching theme.

Ensuring Reliability and Validity in the Data Analysis and in the Findings. The findings of the study will be triangulated. This will confirm findings obtained from several independent sources and contexts. It validates result using more than one instrument and source experiencing similar phenomenon.

Findings are more dependable when they can be confirmed from several independent sources. Their validity is enhanced when they are confirmed by more than one "instrument" measuring the same thing.

The two others steps were done by the researcher in this study and they are Writing which is drafting the output of the data analysis by weaving story of the narratives and literatures and presentation, the thematic and comprehensive presentation of output in an artistic graphs and illustrations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings on the strategies and challenges encountered by primary grade teachers in cultivating character traits among young learners through *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao* (EsP). The analysis was based on in-depth interviews and phenomenological reflections of teacher-participants, highlighting two major themes: (1) the negative influence of external environments and (2) the lack of parental and community support. These themes provide insights into the complex socio-cultural dynamics that affect values education in the primary grades.

Negative Influence of External Environments

Teachers emphasized that children's character development is heavily influenced by their surroundings outside of school. Family dynamics, media exposure, and peer pressure often contradict the values taught in EsP classes, making it difficult for teachers to reinforce moral lessons consistently. Participants reported that inappropriate behaviors learned at home—such as disrespect, aggression, and lack of discipline—tend to persist despite continuous classroom interventions. Moreover, excessive screen time and access to unsuitable media content have further complicated moral formation, exposing learners to language and behavior inconsistent with school expectations.

Peer influence also emerged as a significant challenge, with some students imitating disruptive behaviors from classmates, undermining the values being taught. Teachers shared concerns about inconsistent role models in learners' environments, stating that children are often confused when adults, including family members or figures in media, exhibit actions that contradict moral instruction in school.

These findings affirm the observations of Dubey and Pandey (2020), who argue that external influences, particularly from the home and media, can disrupt the internalization of values. Similarly, Garrett (2022) highlights how permissive parenting and societal norms contribute to behavioral issues, while Dumont (2017) points to the impact of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds on character development. Together, these studies validate the challenges reported by participants, confirming that values education is often undermined by external contradictions.

Lack of Parental and Community Support

Another significant theme that emerged from the data is the lack of parental and community involvement in reinforcing values taught in school. Teachers consistently reported that many parents fail to support or engage in their children's character development. Efforts to collaborate with parents were often unreciprocated, and some participants expressed frustration over parental indifference or preoccupation with economic responsibilities. In some cases, learners were not reprimanded for inappropriate behavior at home, resulting in confusion and inconsistency when teachers attempted to instill discipline at school.

Participants also highlighted the influence of cultural and societal norms that prioritize freedom or leniency over structured moral guidance. This disconnect between school and home environments creates conflicting messages for learners and places the burden of moral instruction solely on teachers.

These findings are supported by existing literature. Dubey and Pandey (2020) emphasize the critical role of parental reinforcement in sustaining values education. When parents are disengaged, the lessons taught in school often lose their impact. Garrett (2022) further stresses that weak community norms and insufficient parental involvement contribute to ongoing disciplinary challenges, a sentiment echoed by several teacher-participants in the current study.

Synthesis

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of values education in primary schools. Teachers face considerable challenges in shaping the character of young learners due to persistent external influences and limited parental collaboration. These issues are not merely pedagogical but are deeply rooted in broader social, cultural, and economic contexts. As such, effective character formation requires more than classroom-based instruction; it necessitates a collaborative approach involving families, communities, and educational leaders.

In conclusion, while teachers remain committed to promoting positive values through EsP, their efforts are often constrained by factors beyond their control. Addressing these challenges requires systemic support, policy interventions, and strengthened partnerships between schools and stakeholders to create a coherent moral framework for young learners. The study's insights contribute to the growing discourse on improving values education in the Philippine context, particularly within the Panabo City Division.

Conclusions

This study highlights the critical role that primary grade teachers play in shaping the character of young learners through Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (ESP). Despite facing significant challenges, such as the negative influence of external environments and a lack of parental and community support, teachers have developed adaptive strategies to foster character development. These strategies, including Modeling and Demonstration of Values and the Integration of Values in Lessons and Activities, are central to creating an environment where young learners can internalize positive character traits. The study underscores that, in order to strengthen character education, schools must actively fortify home-school partnerships and strengthen the integration of values in daily lessons and activities, ensuring that values education extends beyond the classroom and is reinforced at home and within the community.

Furthermore, the study reveals that the external barriers faced by students, such as socioeconomic challenges and negative influences from their surroundings, require teachers to be flexible and resourceful in their approach. Teachers' emphasis on structured routines and the intentional integration of values in various learning activities provides students with the stability and guidance necessary to navigate these external pressures. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that character formation in primary grade learners is most effective when there is a concerted effort to align teaching strategies with the realities of students' home and community environments. By fostering strong home-school-community partnerships and modeling values consistently, ESP teachers can create a cohesive framework for moral development that supports the holistic growth of young learners in Panabo City Division.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations are proposed to enhance character education in Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (ESP) classrooms. First, strengthening home-school partnerships is crucial for reinforcing the values taught in school. Schools should collaborate more closely with parents through workshops, seminars, and regular communication to ensure that character education is consistently supported at home. Also, building stronger community partnerships can help mitigate external challenges, such as socioeconomic barriers and negative environmental influences, by creating a support network that extends beyond the classroom. Schools can also involve local leaders and organizations in promoting values and providing real-world opportunities for students to apply their learning.

Second, it is recommended that ESP teachers continue to prioritize and strengthen their strategies for modeling and demonstrating values. Teachers should lead by example, consistently showcasing the character traits they aim to instill in students. Furthermore, integrating values into all subjects and activities is vital for reinforcing moral lessons across the curriculum. Teachers should adopt flexible, activity-based approaches that connect students' diverse home experiences with classroom teachings, helping to bridge the gap between school values and real-world environments. Finally, schools should provide ongoing professional development for teachers to equip them

with the tools and strategies necessary to effectively integrate values education into their teaching practices and navigate the challenges posed by external influences on their students. These efforts will contribute to creating a more cohesive, supportive, and effective framework for character development in primary education.

Future Directions

The findings of this study present valuable opportunities to advance research and practice in values education. Presenting these results at educational conferences could generate meaningful dialogue about effective character-building strategies and the systemic challenges faced by ESP teachers in primary schools. Future directions of this study could explore the long-term impact of home-school-community partnerships on the character development of primary grade learners, examining how sustained collaboration between these entities influences students' moral growth over time. Further research could also investigate the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies, such as values integration and modeling, across different educational contexts and geographic areas, comparing outcomes in diverse settings. Further, exploring the role of technology in supporting values education, such as through digital platforms or interactive media, could provide new insights into how modern tools can enhance character building. Finally, examining the perspectives of parents and community members on their role in values education could deepen the understanding of the challenges and opportunities in fostering a shared approach to character formation.

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