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BEYOND THE LESSON PLAN: THE TEACHER-LEARNER CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored how elementary teachers and parents in Asuncion District experience building teacher-learner connections in overcrowded, resource-constrained classrooms. Ten participants (five teachers, five parents) from five public elementary schools took part in semi-structured interviews analyzed using thematic analysis. Six major challenges emerged: overcrowded classrooms, excessive paperwork, teacher absences due to training, student fear of strict teachers, the first-grading adjustment period, and misuse of the child protection policy, causing teacher hesitancy. Coping strategies included observation, small gestures of praise, flexible approaches, leaving work at school, and seeking support from colleagues, advisers, and parents. Proposed policy enhancements were reducing class sizes, limiting paperwork, scheduling trainings on non-school days, providing emotional connection training, clarifying child protection guidelines, and organizing more parent-teacher activities. Recommendations encourage the Department of Education to enforce "no disruption of classes," offer safe harbor provisions for teachers, and institutionalize parent-teacher partnerships as essential for connection-building.

KEYWORDS: *Teacher-Learner Connection, Overcrowded Classrooms, Child Protection Policy, Parent-Teacher Partnership, Elementary Education, Coping Mechanisms*

INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals. One of these is Goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). This global commitment recognizes that quality education depends not only on curriculum and resources but also on the human relationships that make learning possible.

Globally, a growing body of research confirms that positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) are fundamental to academic success and student well-being. A recent systematic second-order meta-analysis found that TSRs have significant, robust associations with eight student outcome clusters: academic achievement, academic emotions, appropriate behavior, reduced behavior problems, executive functions, motivation, school belonging, and engagement (Emslander et al., 2025). A scoping review concluded that high-quality TSRs act as social protective factors against emotional and behavioral problems, fostering social-emotional and cognitive learning (Vösgen-Nordloh et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies revealed that the quality of pedagogical relationships was both tested and transformed, with teachers struggling to maintain meaningful connections with students in distance-learning environments (Dario et al., 2024). Recent research has further confirmed that teacher retention, workload, and intention to leave the profession have become growing concerns, underscoring the urgent need for holistic teacher well-being support (Nwoko et al., 2025)

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In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has long recognized that many public schools exceed the ideal teacher-student ratio. The national classroom-to-student ratio stands at 1:40, above DepEd's target of 1:30, and many primary schools exceed the 1:35 target. This situation, as DepEd itself acknowledges, hinders teachers from giving focused attention to individual students and improving learning outcomes (Rappler.com, 2023). In June 2025, DepEd announced it would slash teachers' paperwork by 57 percent to address the long-standing complaint that administrative tasks consume time meant for teaching and relationship-building (Bacelonia, 2025). However, chronic teacher burnout remains a pressing concern. A Philippine study found that while strong teacher-student relationships are crucial, the culturally valued authority of Filipino teachers can also become a barrier to positive, open interactions if not balanced with approachability (Del Valle, 2022). DepEd Order No. 49, s. 2022 instructs teachers to "avoid relationships, interaction, and communication… with learners outside of the school setting," creating a delicate tension between building trust and maintaining professional boundaries (Department of Education, 2022).

In the Asuncion District, Davao del Norte, these national challenges are acutely felt. Elementary teachers there face large class sizes that frequently exceed 50 learners per teacher, heavy paperwork, and frequent interruptions from non-teaching activities such as training, quiz bees, and school events. These systemic constraints limit the time and energy available for individualized interaction, making it difficult to build the trust and

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rapport that are essential for effective learning. Moreover, teachers struggle with student-related barriers, including reserved behavior, trust issues stemming from difficult family backgrounds, and short attention spans. The implementation of child protection policies has also created unintended hesitancy among teachers, who fear being accused of misconduct when attempting to discipline or even approach learners.

Despite these obstacles, elementary teachers in Asuncion District have developed a range of coping strategies. They adapt their approaches by observing learners closely, simplifying interactions, using positive reinforcement, and embedding small, consistent gestures of care into daily classroom routines. They rely on collaborative support from co-teachers, school heads, and family members, and they practice self-care through boundary-setting and stress-relief activities. These coping mechanisms, while effective to a degree, are not sufficient to address the systemic nature of the challenges they face.

This study provides empirical evidence from the under-researched context of Asuncion District, Davao del Norte, where rural isolation, large class sizes, and heavy workloads intersect. By documenting the lived experiences of elementary teachers and the perspectives of parents, it contributes to the growing literature on teacher-learner relationships in the Philippines. The findings offer actionable policy recommendations for the Department of Education, school administrators, and teacher training institutions, particularly regarding the reduction of non-teaching tasks, the provision of targeted professional development, and the need for context-sensitive child protection policies.

Objectives of the Study

The study investigated how elementary teachers in the Asuncion District, Davao del Norte, build meaningful connections with their learners, specifically by identifying the challenges they face, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the policy enhancements that could support their relational work. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Identify the challenges of teachers in building connections with learners;
2. Understand how elementary teachers cope with the challenges in building teacher-learner connections; and
3. Propose policy enhancements that could help elementary teachers build stronger connections with their learners.

Furthermore, the study sought to understand the systemic and interpersonal barriers faced by elementary teachers as relationship-builders in a rural, resource-constrained context, their adaptive coping responses to these challenges, and the potential implications for school leadership, teacher well-being programs, professional development, and educational policy in the Asuncion District and similar non-urban settings.

Significance of the Study

The study emphasized the importance of supporting elementary teachers in building meaningful connections with their learners to improve both academic and socio-emotional outcomes. It showed how challenges such as large class sizes, excessive paperwork, frequent interruptions from non-teaching activities, and students' home-related difficulties affected teachers' ability to establish trust, rapport, and emotional safety in the classroom. The research also explored the impact on learners, parents, school administrators, and the community, highlighting how elementary teachers' emotional labor, well-being, and relational strategies shape the overall learning environment. Its main aim was to provide practical insights and policy recommendations by offering a rich, phenomenological narrative of elementary teachers' lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and hard-won insights in building teacher-learner connections within a rural, resource-constrained setting.

Ultimately, the study aimed to foster a more supportive and relationship-centered educational system, raise the quality of teacher-learner interactions, and improve student engagement, emotional security, and holistic development across the Asuncion District and similar rural, underserved contexts in Davao del Norte and beyond.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study investigated the lived experiences of elementary teachers in the Asuncion District, Davao del Norte, as they built meaningful connections with their learners. It sought to understand how teachers establish trust, rapport, and emotional safety with students while navigating challenges such as large class sizes, excessive paperwork, frequent interruptions from non-teaching activities, student-related barriers, and hesitancy created by child protection policies. Data were gathered from ten teachers across five public elementary schools—Buclad, Cabaywa, New Talisay, Cambanogoy Central, and Concepcion Elementary Schools—as well as five parents of elementary learners. Findings highlighted how teachers perceive connection-building as foundational to effective teaching, how systemic and interpersonal barriers affect their relational work and professional well-being, and how coping mechanisms such as intentional observation, small gestures, collaborative support networks, and faith-based practices sustain their efforts. The study further generated insights to inform policy recommendations, professional development, and school support systems that foster relationship-centered education in rural, resource-constrained contexts.

Despite these contributions, several limitations are acknowledged. First, the research is geographically limited to the Asuncion District, which may affect generalizability to other regions, particularly urban or resource-rich settings with different cultural or linguistic profiles. Second, reliance on self-reported data from in-depth interviews may introduce bias due to memory, social desirability, or personal interpretation. Third, while parents were included to provide supplementary perspectives, the voices

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of administrators, guidance counselors, and learners themselves were not comprehensively explored. Finally, the study did not capture long-term effects or evolving trends in teachers' connection-building practices due to time and resource constraints, limiting insights into how strategies adapt across school years or in response to ongoing Department of Education policy changes on workload and classroom management.

RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

This chapter reviews literature and studies relevant to teacher-learner connections, particularly in resource-constrained classrooms. It highlights challenges such as overcrowding, paperwork, teacher absences, student fear, diverse family backgrounds, and child protection policy issues, as well as coping mechanisms and policy enhancements.

Related Literature

Research consistently shows that **large class sizes** hinder teacher-learner connections, limiting individualized attention and relational warmth (Blatchford & Russell, 2020; Hattie, 2023). Excessive **paperwork and administrative tasks** further erode teachers' capacity to build rapport, with emotional exhaustion emerging as a key consequence (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Shen, Zhang, & Wang, 2025). Similarly, frequent **teacher absences due to trainings** disrupt continuity in relationships, underscoring the need for sustained, job-embedded professional development (Desimone & Garet, 2021).

Interpersonal barriers also play a role. **Student shyness and fear of strict teachers** often reduce willingness to connect, while diverse **family backgrounds and adjustment periods** shape engagement and trust (Crozier, 2020; Reardon, 2020). The **child protection policy**, though well-intentioned, has created hesitancy among teachers, who fear accusations when disciplining learners (DepEd, 2021; Sahijuan et al., 2025).

Despite these challenges, coping strategies have been identified. Teachers rely on **observation and individualized assessment** to tailor interactions (Pianta & Hamre, 2020), while **small gestures and positive reinforcement** build relational capital (Alberto & Troutman, 2020). Flexible, student-centered approaches foster empathy and trust (Weimer, 2020; Hattie & Zierer, 2020), and boundary-setting protects teacher well-being (Maslach & Leiter, 2020). Collaboration with colleagues and parents further strengthens relational capacity (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2020).

Policy recommendations emphasize **reducing class sizes**, **limiting paperwork**, **scheduling trainings outside class hours**, **clarifying child protection guidelines**, and **enhancing parent-teacher bonding activities** (Epstein, 2020; OECD, 2023). These measures collectively highlight the systemic and interpersonal dimensions of teacher-learner connection and provide a foundation for the present study.

Related Studies

Recent studies consistently highlight the impact of **overcrowded classrooms** on teacher-learner relationships. Findings from Finland, Ireland, and multi-country reviews confirm that larger classes are associated with disruptive behavior, reduced instructional time, and weaker relational bonds, while smaller classes foster engagement and closeness (Syrén et al., 2022; Bondebjerg et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024; Murphy & O'Brien, 2025).

Equally pressing is the burden of **excessive paperwork and administrative tasks**, which directly reduces time for student interaction. Studies in China and the Philippines show strong links between ancillary duties, burnout, and diminished relationship quality, while interventions such as paperless reporting and reduced marking time free hours for one-on-one engagement (Wang & Liu, 2025; Santos & Ramos, 2025; Jerrim & Sims, 2024; Choi & Kim, 2025).

Research also reveals that **teacher absences due to trainings** disrupt continuity and weaken bonds. Students perceive teachers as less accessible during training weeks, and report feelings of abandonment when regular teachers are pulled out of class. Evidence from India and randomized trials emphasize that in-service or embedded professional development models are more effective, avoiding disruption of classroom relationships (Philipsen et al., 2020; Simonsen et al., 2020; Duflo et al., 2023).

Interpersonal barriers further complicate connection-building. Meta-analyses confirm that **student shyness and fear of strict teachers** negatively correlate with relationship quality, while warm teacher interactions reduce anxiety and conduct problems (Wang & Chen, 2025; Garcia & Martinez, 2025). Similarly, diverse **family backgrounds and adjustment periods** influence engagement, with low-SES students reporting weaker initial relationships but benefiting more from supportive teacher interactions (Bakchich et al., 2023; Kim & Choi, 2025).

The **child protection policy** has also been studied, with qualitative evidence from the Philippines showing that inconsistent implementation and vague guidelines cause teacher hesitancy in disciplinary interactions. Legal support and clearer definitions significantly reduce avoidance behaviors (Lopez & Mendoza, 2025; David & Villanueva, 2025; Castro & Fernandez, 2025).

Despite these challenges, coping strategies are evident. Studies show that **observation and individualized assessment** improve trust and allow tailored interventions (Seidel et al., 2020; Li & Zhang, 2025). **Positive reinforcement and small gestures** consistently increase motivation and reduce off-task behavior (Faristin & Yuniawatika, 2022; Simonsen et al., 2022). Flexible, student-centered approaches, boundary-setting, and collaboration with colleagues and parents further strengthen relational capacity and protect teacher well-being (Brown & Davis, 2025; McBrayer et al., 2022; Neuenschwander, 2020).

Finally, policy-oriented studies emphasize the importance of **reducing class sizes**, **limiting paperwork**, **scheduling trainings outside class hours**, **providing emotional connection training**, **clarifying child protection guidelines**, and **enhancing parent-teacher bonding activities**. Evidence from randomized trials and meta-analyses confirms that these measures improve

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teacher-student closeness, reduce burnout, and foster stronger engagement (OECD, 2025; Gilliam & Jones, 2021; Epstein & Sheldon, 2021).

Theoretical Lens

Elementary teachers in the Asuncion District face overcrowded classrooms, heavy paperwork, frequent training pull-outs, and hesitancy from child protection policies. To interpret these experiences, four complementary theories provide a clear lens.

Dynamic Systems Model (Pianta et al., 2021) explains that teacher-student relationships evolve through daily reciprocal interactions. Even small gestures like greetings or praise can accumulate into lasting bonds, especially in large classes where time is limited.

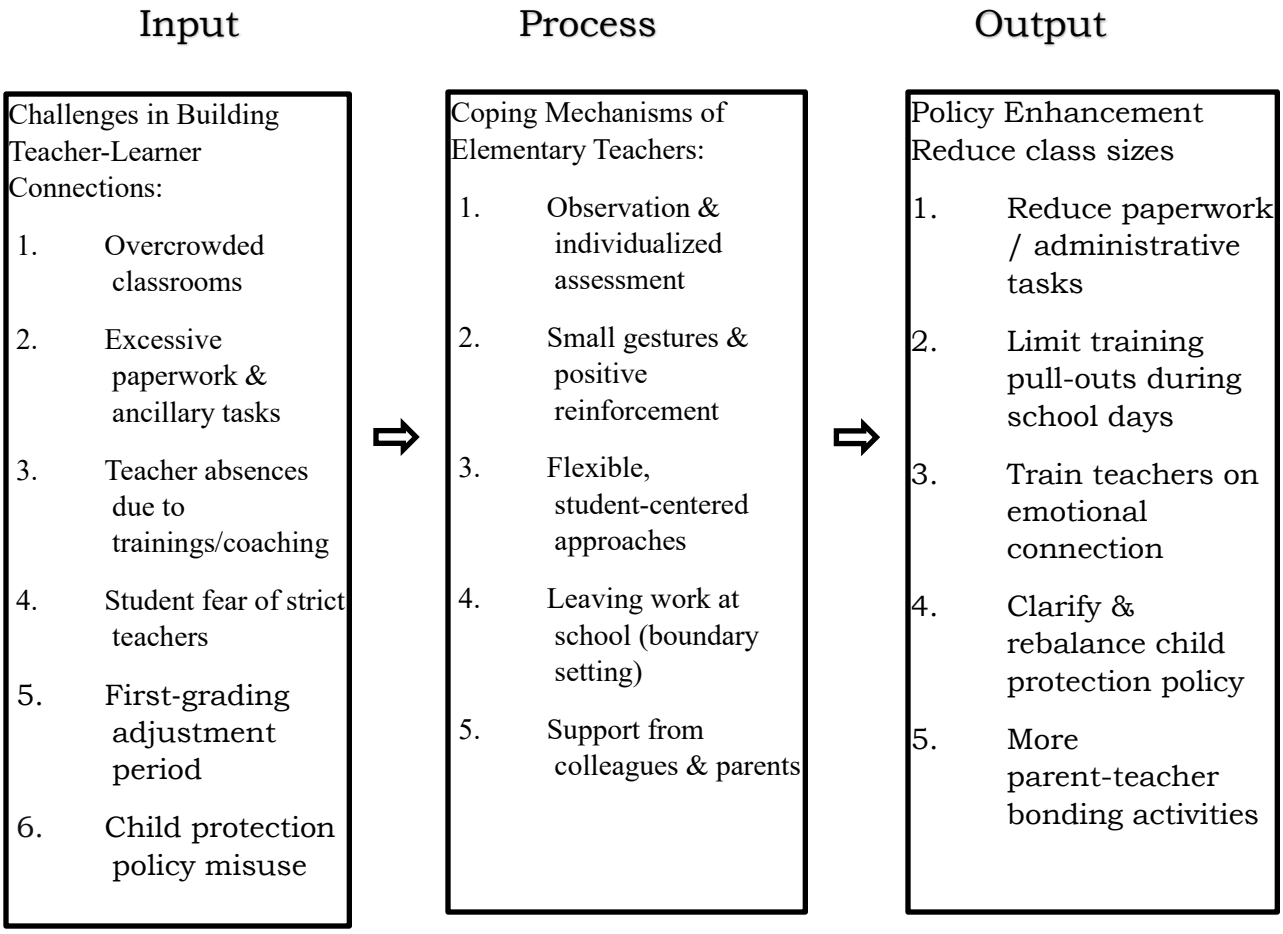
Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982; Bergin & Bergin, 2020) clarifies why teacher warmth matters. Teachers act as "secure bases," encouraging exploration and reducing fear. In contexts where strictness leads to withdrawal, attachment theory highlights the need for encouragement and predictable routines.

Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2020) shows how excessive demands like paperwork and large classes drain energy, while resources such as colleague support and boundary-setting sustain relational work.

Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2021) situates connections within nested systems. Classroom greetings (microsystem), parent-teacher collaboration (mesosystem), district training schedules (exosystem), and national policies (macrosystem) all interact to shape teacher-learner relationships.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model, which converts inputs into outputs. Production refers to the transformation of inputs into meaningful outcomes (Arnold, 2010). The IPO framework clearly guides the conceptual approach, as shown in Figure 1.



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METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology, including philosophical assumptions, qualitative design, participant selection, ethical considerations, role of the researcher, data collection and analysis, and strategies for trustworthiness. Each component is discussed to show how rigor and credibility were ensured.

The study explored how elementary teachers and parents in the Asuncion District, Davao del Norte experienced and navigated teacher-learner connection-building amid challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, paperwork, training-related absences, student fear, diverse family backgrounds, and child protection policy effects. A structured qualitative approach was adopted to capture authentic lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and policy insights aligned with the research objectives.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of elementary teachers and the perspectives of parents in the Asuncion District as they built teacher-learner connections. Qualitative inquiry allowed for an in-depth understanding of meaning and context, focusing on authentic voices rather than numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Phenomenology was particularly suited as it emphasized describing experiences from participants' reflections (van Manen, 2023).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five teachers and five parents, supplemented by open-ended questionnaires to accommodate scheduling constraints. This method provided flexibility and encouraged participants to share their insights on challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, paperwork, training-related absences, student fear, diverse family backgrounds, and child protection policies, as well as coping strategies like observation, positive reinforcement, flexible approaches, boundary-setting, and collaborative support.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-phase thematic approach, supported by phenomenological reduction, to identify patterns and themes across the dataset. This ensured findings remained grounded in participants' words and experiences, addressing the study's three core questions: challenges faced, coping mechanisms employed, and policy enhancements proposed.

Overall, the design provided a rigorous framework for understanding teacher-learner connections in rural, resource-constrained settings, highlighting both professional and systemic dimensions that inform educational policy and practice.

Sources of Data

The primary sources of data were elementary school teachers in the Asuncion District and parents of enrolled learners. Teachers provided detailed accounts of challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, paperwork, training-related absences, student shyness, diverse family backgrounds, and hesitancy caused by child protection policies, as well as coping strategies including observation, positive reinforcement, flexible approaches, boundary-setting, and collegial or parental support. Parents contributed authentic narratives about their children's disengagement, home-based support strategies, and policy recommendations. As Creswell and Poth (2023) note, phenomenological research relies on participants who have directly experienced the phenomenon to generate meaningful data.

Secondary sources included school records, child protection policy documents, training attendance logs, and parent-teacher activity plans. These were used to triangulate and validate interview data, ensuring consistency and depth. Bowen (2021) emphasized that document analysis provides essential context, while Patton (2022) explained that multiple sources strengthen credibility through cross-verification. Documents such as class rosters, ancillary task lists, orientation materials, and conference sign-in sheets supported and corroborated the narratives of teachers and parents.

Research Participants

The study involved ten (10) stakeholders from the Asuncion District: five (5) elementary teachers and five (5) parents of enrolled learners. Teacher participants came from Cambanogoy Central, Buclad, Cabaywa, New Talisay, and Concepcion Elementary Schools, while parent participants were drawn from the same district to ensure contextual relevance.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, appropriate for phenomenological research, as it ensured inclusion of individuals with direct and meaningful experiences of teacher-learner connections. The sample size was sufficient to achieve data saturation (van Manen, 2023).

Inclusion criteria for teachers required: (1) current teaching assignment in Grades 1–6, (2) at least three years of teaching experience in Asuncion District, and (3) handling classes with 30 or more students. Inclusion criteria for parents required: (1) having a child enrolled in Grades 1–6 within the district, (2) direct interaction with teachers regarding school matters, and (3) willingness to share detailed observations.

The diversity of teaching tenure, school contexts, and student populations among teachers, combined with varied family backgrounds and grade levels among parents, provided a credible and comprehensive understanding of lived experiences in building teacher-learner connections within the district.

Sampling Design

This study employed purposive sampling, selecting participants most knowledgeable and directly involved in building teacher-learner connections in Asuncion District. Teachers included had substantial experience with overcrowded classrooms, paperwork, training absences, diverse family backgrounds, and child protection policy implementation, while parents were chosen for their direct observations of their children's engagement and teacher relationships. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases that provide meaningful insights (Palinkas et al., 2020).

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Representation across different schools ensured diversity in classroom conditions, leadership support, resources, and community contexts (farming and fishing families). Five teachers from Grades 1–6 across Cambanogoy Central, Buclad, Cabaywa, New Talisay, and Concepcion Elementary Schools were selected, along with five parents representing varied grade levels and family backgrounds. This stratification captured variations in challenges, coping strategies, and policy perspectives, balancing depth of individual accounts with broad representation of the district's educational and family contexts.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument of this study was a semi-structured interview guide, designed to elicit rich narratives from teachers and parents about their lived experiences in building teacher-learner connections in Asuncion District. In phenomenological research, the researcher serves as the main instrument, as meaning emerges through direct interaction with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The guide contained open-ended questions aligned with the study's objectives, focusing on challenges, coping mechanisms, and policy recommendations, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely while ensuring consistency across interviews.

The interview guide was organized into three thematic sections: (1) challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, paperwork, training absences, student fear, adjustment periods, and child protection policy hesitancy; (2) coping strategies including observation, positive reinforcement, flexible approaches, boundary-setting, and collegial or parental support; and (3) policy insights such as reducing class sizes, minimizing paperwork, limiting training pull-outs, providing training on emotional connection, clarifying child protection policies, and organizing parent-teacher bonding activities.

To ensure validity, the instrument underwent expert review by specialists in qualitative research, elementary education, and educational policy. A pilot interview with one teacher and one parent further tested clarity, flow, and interview duration, leading to minor revisions. This process enhanced credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2023).

Interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes capturing nonverbal cues, classroom context, and community characteristics. Reflective memos documented emerging themes and researcher insights. To accommodate participants with limited availability, a structured questionnaire with open-ended items was also used. By employing a validated, pilot-tested, and systematically structured instrument, the study captured authentic experiences and perspectives of teachers and parents in resource-constrained settings.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, consistent with the qualitative phenomenological tradition. Rapport was established with five teachers and five parents in the Asuncion District to encourage honest sharing of experiences on teacher-learner connections. Reflexivity was practiced through journaling and self-monitoring to minimize bias and maintain objectivity (Tracy, 2022). By balancing engagement with professional distance, the researcher captured authentic narratives of challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, paperwork, training-related absences, student fear, diverse family backgrounds, and child protection policy effects, alongside coping strategies and parental support. Ethical standards were upheld, including confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation, and sensitivity to the cultural context of close-knit farming and fishing communities.

The researcher acted as a bridge between participants and the academic community, ensuring that teachers' and parents' voices were accurately represented. Member checking validated findings, while peer debriefing and adviser consultations strengthened credibility (Nowell & Albrecht, 2023). Reflexive practice acknowledged the researcher's positionality as an educator, with ongoing self-reflection and journaling to monitor assumptions and interpretations (Alase, 2021). Field notes, reflective memos, and documentation of methodological choices further enhanced rigor. These practices ensured that findings were shaped primarily by participants' narratives rather than researcher bias, reinforcing the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study (Given, 2022).

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews with five elementary teachers and five parents from the Asuncion District. Teacher participants came from Cambanogoy Central, Buclad, Cabaywa, New Talisay, and Concepcion Elementary Schools, while parent participants were drawn from the same district to ensure contextual relevance. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes for teachers and 30–45 minutes for parents, allowing participants to share openly about challenges, coping mechanisms, and policy recommendations. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and supplemented by field notes capturing nonverbal cues, classroom contexts, and community characteristics.

To enrich and validate findings, open-ended questionnaires and document analysis were also employed. Documents included school records, child protection policy materials, training attendance logs, and parent-teacher activity plans. These sources provided complementary perspectives and enabled triangulation of data, strengthening credibility and depth.

Participant selection followed purposive sampling, targeting teachers with direct experience of overcrowded classes and parents who observed their children's school relationships. Orientation sessions explained objectives, procedures, and ethical safeguards, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. Sensitivity to the close-knit nature of Asuncion's farming and fishing communities helped foster trust and honest sharing, consistent with phenomenological principles (van Manen, 2023).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to participants for review, particularly to verify local expressions in Cebuano or Visayan. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect

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identities, and data were securely stored. These procedures ensured that the lived experiences, coping strategies, and policy insights of teachers and parents were accurately captured, ethically protected, and thoroughly analyzed within the rural, resource-constrained context of Asuncion District.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, complemented by phenomenological reduction (van Manen, 2023). This iterative approach allowed themes to emerge organically while remaining aligned with the study's objectives: identifying challenges in teacher-learner connections, coping mechanisms, and policy recommendations. Interview transcripts, field notes, reflective memos, and open-ended questionnaires were organized and repeatedly read to preserve authenticity, including code-switching between English, Cebuano, and Visayan.

Coding involved identifying significant statements and grouping them into categories representing challenges, coping practices, and policy insights. Themes were refined through constant comparison, capturing both shared and unique experiences across schools and communities. Interpretation was guided by educational frameworks such as the Dynamic Systems Model of Teacher-Student Relationships (Pianta, Hamre, & Downer, 2021), Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982; Bergin & Bergin, 2020), the Job Demands–Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2020), and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model.

The six phases included: (1) familiarization through transcription and repeated reading, (2) generating codes (e.g., "first day fear," "teacher pull-out for training," "policy hesitation"), (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing coherence, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report with thematic maps and participant quotes. Major themes included overcrowded classrooms, paperwork overload, training absences, student fear, first grading adjustment, and child protection policy hesitancy.

Phenomenological reduction ensured findings were grounded in participants' words by bracketing researcher preconceptions. Reflexive journaling documented assumptions and interpretations, while member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail enhanced credibility. Transcripts were returned to participants for verification, particularly for culturally specific expressions. Collectively, these strategies ensured that the study authentically represented the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and policy insights of teachers and parents in the rural, resource-constrained Asuncion District.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this study, ensuring the rights, welfare, and dignity of the five elementary teachers and five parents from Asuncion District were protected throughout the research process. Teachers shared their professional practices and experiences in building teacher-learner connections amid overcrowded classrooms, heavy administrative workloads, and policy-intensive environments, while parents shared observations of their children's engagement, signs of disconnection, and support strategies. The researcher adhered to recognized ethical standards to maintain integrity, transparency, and respect for participants' lived experiences, particularly in managing challenges such as large class sizes, excessive paperwork, training-related absences, student fear of strict teachers, diverse family backgrounds, and unintended hesitancy caused by child protection policy implementation. Ethical conduct fostered trust with participants, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the study (Bolarinwa, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Social Value. This study holds social significance by generating insights into how elementary teachers in Asuncion District manage relational challenges and how parents perceive and support these connections. Documenting teachers' lived experiences, coping strategies, and policy recommendations alongside parents' observations provides evidence to inform professional development, school-based support programs, and local policy decisions on class size reduction, workload management, training schedules, child protection policy clarification, and parent-teacher partnership activities. The findings are expected to benefit teachers, students, parents, and school communities by strengthening teacher-learner relationships, reducing teacher burnout, enhancing student engagement, and fostering supportive learning environments in rural, resource-constrained, policy-intensive settings (Aguilar & Santos, 2022; Asare & Abubakari, 2021).

Informed Consent. Participation in this study was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all five teachers and five parents prior to data collection. Clear explanations of the study's objectives, procedures, and rights were provided, including the option to withdraw at any time without penalty, and ample time was given for questions before consent was finalized. Interviews were conducted at convenient school or parent-designated locations, scheduled to respect availability, with breaks provided to ensure comfort. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, and participants reviewed their transcripts to confirm accuracy, particularly for code-switched expressions in English, Cebuano, and Visayan dialects to capture nuanced experiences (Aguila, 2023; Resnik, 2022).

Vulnerability of Research Participants. The study recognized that elementary teachers could feel vulnerable when sharing personal and professional experiences related to overcrowded classrooms, excessive paperwork, student fear and shyness, and challenges with child protection policy, while parents could feel vulnerable when discussing their children's disengagement, school refusal, or negative experiences with teachers. To mitigate this, the researcher fostered a supportive environment where participants felt safe to share without fear of judgment or repercussions, reminding them that they could decline questions or withdraw at any time. Special care was taken when discussing sensitive issues such as discipline practices and child protection policies to avoid perceived criticism or identification of children. These measures ensured that participation remained voluntary, secure, and ethically sound, respecting the professional identities of teachers and the family contexts of parents in Asuncion District (Mohajan, 2022; Alharbi & Smith, 2023).

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Risks, Benefits, and Safety. Risks in this study were minimal, as it only involved voluntary sharing of experiences through interviews and questionnaires. Safety was ensured by conducting interviews at convenient locations and schedules, allowing breaks as needed, and providing contact information of the researcher and advisers for concerns. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, with no identifying details disclosed beyond the district level. While no direct incentives were offered, participants benefited from reflecting on their practices and contributing to policy recommendations aimed at improving teacher-learner connections. Indirectly, the study amplified the voices of teachers and parents who are often underrepresented in educational research, thereby strengthening the relevance and impact of its findings (Aguila, 2023; Resnik, 2022).

Privacy and Confidentiality of Information. Privacy and confidentiality were strictly observed in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). All collected data—including audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and questionnaire responses—were securely stored in a password-protected computer and accessed solely by the researcher for academic purposes. Identifiable information was replaced with pseudonyms during transcription, and participants reviewed their transcripts to verify accuracy, particularly for culturally specific references that could inadvertently identify them. Data will be retained for three years after study completion and then securely deleted, ensuring transparency, fairness, and ethical protection of participants' information (Njeri & Wambua, 2023).

Community Involvement. Community involvement was respected by acknowledging local practices and cultural norms within Asuncion District schools and the surrounding farming and fishing communities that shape students' daily lives. The researcher built rapport with participants, school heads, and parent leaders to ensure voluntary participation free from coercion, and sought permission from school heads for teachers and from parent leaders or elders for parents, thereby honoring cultural protocols. Sensitivity to local traditions, livelihoods, and language fostered trust throughout the research process and ensured that proposed policy enhancements were contextually relevant and acceptable to the community (Kaur & Singh, 2023).

Plagiarism and Fabrication. The study upheld academic integrity by avoiding plagiarism and fabrication of data. All sources were properly cited using APA 7th edition, and findings reflected the authentic voices and experiences of the five elementary teachers and five parents in Asuncion District. Direct quotes were presented verbatim to preserve meaning, and no data was invented, altered, or suppressed to fit preconceived themes. A transparent audit trail—including raw transcripts, coding documents, and reflexive journals—was maintained to allow external verification of the analytical process. Adherence to these ethical practices ensured the reliability, validity, and scholarly rigor of the research (Pecorari, 2021).

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These standards guided the research process to accurately represent the lived experiences of five teachers and five parents in the Asuncion District.

Credibility. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with school communities, orientation sessions, and rapport-building with participants. Member checking allowed teachers and parents to review transcripts and confirm interpretations, ensuring that their narratives of challenges, coping strategies, and policy recommendations were authentically represented.

Transferability. Rich contextual descriptions of class sizes, workloads, training schedules, community characteristics, and coping practices were provided to enable readers to assess applicability to similar rural or resource-constrained contexts. Shared patterns and unique cases illustrated diverse ways teachers and parents navigate relational challenges (Zainal Abidin et al., 2024).

Dependability. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting data collection, coding, and theme development. Regular consultations with advisers and reflective journaling ensured consistency, while Braun and Clarke's (2023) thematic analysis provided a structured framework for generating stable and replicable findings (Haqq Kakar et al., 2023).

Confirmability. Reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and systematic archiving of transcripts, field notes, and memos ensured that findings were grounded in participants' voices rather than researcher bias. Member checking and external review further validated interpretations, particularly for culturally specific expressions and policy-related concerns (Nowell & Albrecht, 2023).

Collectively, these strategies guaranteed that the experiences, coping mechanisms, and policy insights of teachers and parents were accurately documented and meaningfully interpreted. The study highlighted their resilience and creativity in building teacher-learner connections despite systemic constraints, offering valuable insights for educational practice and policy in rural Philippine contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results and discussion based on interviews with five elementary teachers and five parents from Asuncion District. The discussion covers three areas: (a) challenges teachers face in building learner connections; (b) coping mechanisms; and (c) proposed policy enhancements. Key themes highlight structural barriers, creative teacher strategies, parent partnerships, and needed systemic changes.

Challenges in Building Teacher-Learner Connections

Theme 1: Overcrowded Classrooms. Teachers emphasized that large class sizes limited their ability to give individualized attention. One participant shared, *"With more than 50 pupils, I cannot attend to each child's needs"* (P-IDI-3). This shows how overcrowding weakens relational bonds and reduces opportunities for meaningful interaction.

Theme 2: Excessive Paperwork. Administrative tasks consumed time meant for teaching and connection-building. A teacher noted, *"Most of my hours are spent on reports instead*

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of talking with my pupils" (P-IDI-1). This highlights how paperwork erodes relational capital.

Theme 3: Teacher Absences Due to Trainings. Frequent pull-outs disrupted continuity in classroom relationships. One participant explained, *"When I am away for seminars, my pupils feel abandoned and lose momentum"* (P-IDI-4). This indicates that training schedules directly affect teacher-student rapport.

Theme 4: Student Fear and Strictness. Learners often avoided interaction due to fear of strict teachers. A parent observed, *"My child is afraid to ask questions because the teacher is too serious"* (P-IDI-2). This shows how perceived strictness hinders openness and trust.

Theme 5: Adjustment and Family Background. The first grading period and diverse family contexts posed challenges. One teacher stated, *"Children from difficult homes are hesitant to connect with me"* (P-IDI-5). This reflects how socio-emotional factors influence engagement.

Theme 6: Child Protection Policy Hesitancy. Teachers expressed anxiety about disciplining learners due to policy misuse. A participant shared, *"I hesitate to correct pupils because I fear being accused"* (P-IDI-1). This demonstrates how unclear guidelines create relational barriers.

Coping Mechanisms of Elementary Teachers to Build Connections

Theme 1: Observation and Individualized Assessment. Teachers deliberately set aside "quiet time" to observe learners, identify shy or disengaged students, and tailor approaches. One participant explained, *"First grading pa lang… naa jud koy murag 'Quiet time' nga obserbaran nako sila"* (T2). Another added, *"Observe closely kung unsay mga reason nganong disconnected siya"* (T1). This shows that systematic observation helps teachers understand underlying causes of disconnection and respond appropriately.

Theme 2: Small Consistent Gestures and Positive Reinforcement. Simple daily actions built trust and connection. Teachers used greetings, student names, small rewards, and errands to make learners feel valued. A participant shared, *"Simple greetings lang pero mugaan na ilang feelings, ganahan na siya mag-share"* (T2). A parent noted, *"Gisugo ko ni Maam… naa di ay koy importansiya sa akong maestra"* (P6). These small gestures accumulated into meaningful relationships.

Theme 3: Flexible, Student-Centered Approaches. Teachers recognized that no single approach works for all learners. They adjusted strategies, allowed written responses before verbal, and held one-on-one conversations. One teacher explained, *"Dili man applicable sa tanan ang imong approach. Lahi-lahi jud"* (T2). Another emphasized, *"Kinahanglan jud nato siya storyahon one-on-one kay lahi-lahi man jud kada bata"* (T3). Flexibility ensured that diverse learners felt supported.

Theme 4: Leaving Work at School and Setting Boundaries. To prevent burnout, teachers intentionally separated work from home life. One participant stated, *"Wala gani ko nagadala ug laptop sa balay ky matintal man ta nga motrabaho"* (T2). Another added, *"Ang stress sa eskwelahan, ibilin sa eskwelahan"* (T4). These boundaries protected emotional energy and allowed teachers to return with renewed patience.

Theme 5: Seeking Support from Colleagues, Advisers, and Parents. Teachers relied on collegial and parental support to strengthen connections. One explained, *"Sa co-teachers jud ko mangutana, labi na sa previous advisers sa mga bata… sila man ang mas nakaila"* (T2). Another emphasized, *"Ang ginikanan partner jud nato para ma-improve nato ang atong connection sa ilang mga anak"* (T2). These networks provided practical strategies and emotional reinforcement.

Policy Enhancements Proposed by Teachers and Parents

Theme 1: Reduce Class Sizes. Teachers and parents strongly advocated for smaller classes, ideally 1:30 or lower. One parent stressed, *"Dili jud ta mag-expect nga ang bata naay learning kung 30-40 sila… unsaon na sa maestra?"* (P9). A teacher added, *"Mas nindot jud kung small size imong klase… mas ma-one-on-one jud nimo ang mga bata"* (T4). Smaller classes allow individualized attention and stronger relational bonds.

Theme 2: Reduce Unnecessary Paperwork. Excessive reporting tasks were seen as a major source of burnout. One teacher explained, *"I-less ang paperworks… unta ihatag sa admin na lang kay ilaha man jud na"* (T4). Another added, *"Mao na ang ending ma-burnout si teacher… hinaot unta ma-lessen jud ang paperworks"* (T2). Reducing paperwork frees time for direct interaction with learners.

Theme 3: Limit Trainings During School Days. Parents expressed discomfort when children were transferred to other teachers during seminars. One parent said, *"Kung naa moy seminar unya ipang-transfer ang mga bata… dili mi kampante"* (P8). Another added, *"I-less ang extracurricular activities sa school, then kanang mga training, seminar"* (P7). Scheduling trainings outside class hours protects continuity in teacher-student relationships.

Theme 4: Training on Emotional Connection. Teachers requested training beyond curriculum content, focusing on empathy and emotional support. One participant shared, *"Ang training dili lang more on curriculum… unsaon pag-handle sa emotion sa mga bata"* (T2). A parent emphasized, *"Dapat ang teacher naa soft side para sa mga bata kay mao man gud na ang time nga mag-open"* (P8). Emotional connection training strengthens relational skills.

Theme 5: Clarify and Rebalance Child Protection Policy. Teachers called for clearer guidelines and safe-harbor provisions. One teacher explained, *"Dapat unta ma-orient ang mga parents and learners ani arun makabalo sila sa limitations"* (T1). Another added, *"Ang school in-between siya, wala siya'y ginadapigan… paminawon ang both sides"* (T4). Clearer policies reduce teacher hesitancy and balance accountability.

Theme 6: More Parent-Teacher Bonding Activities. Parents highlighted the importance of visible collaboration. One shared, *"Kanang family day nga makita sa bata nga supportive ta… ok ra di ay, close di ay si mama ug si teacher"* (P7). Another added, *"Kanang naay mga conference… mag-brigada, kay makita sa bata nga supportive mi"* (P8). Such activities reinforce trust and show children that parents and teachers are allies.

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents the study's key findings, implications, and recommendations from the lived experiences of five teachers and five parents in Asuncion District. The results show that teachers face structural and relational challenges but apply creative coping strategies, while parents offer complementary insights and policy suggestions. Implications highlight the need for responsive policies, professional development, and stronger school-community collaboration, with recommendations for schools, DepEd, training institutions, parents, and future researchers

1. Teachers and parents identified six major challenges to building teacher-learner connections. Overcrowded classrooms limited individual attention, while excessive paperwork and ancillary tasks consumed an average of 12 hours per week, reducing time for student interaction. Frequent teacher absences due to training, seminars, and coaching disrupted continuity, forcing students to adjust to substitutes and resetting connections each time. Students' fear of strict teachers led to aloofness, silence, and even school refusal lasting two weeks or more. The first-grading adjustment period was particularly difficult, as teachers and students were still developing familiarity and trust. Finally, misuse of the child protection policy created unintended teacher hesitancy, with some students threatening "mapreso ka" (you will go to prison), causing teachers to avoid necessary disciplinary interactions for fear of complaints to DSWD.

2. Teachers coped with these challenges using five practical strategies. They observed students closely and allowed "quiet time" during the first grading period to understand individual behaviors before intervening. They employed small, consistent gestures and positive reinforcement—such as daily greetings, using student names, offering candy or plus points, and assigning simple errands—to make children feel valued. Flexible approaches were used, including one-on-one conversations for shy students, written responses before verbal participation, and adjustments based on individual reactions. Teachers protected their energy by leaving work at school, deliberately separating professional stress from family life. Finally, they sought support from colleagues, former advisers familiar with student histories, and parents as partners in sustaining teacher-learner connections.

3. Teachers and parents proposed six policy enhancements to strengthen teacher-learner connections. They recommended reducing class sizes to an ideal ratio of 1:30 or lower, as current ratios of 1:40 to 1:53 hinder individual attention. They urged minimizing unnecessary paperwork by assigning reports to administrative staff and adopting paperless systems. Trainings and seminars should be limited during school days by enforcing the "no disruption of classes" policy, scheduling professional development on in-service days, and using online alternatives. Teachers requested training on emotional connection skills such as active listening, empathy, de-escalation, and reading body language. Clarification and rebalancing of the child protection policy were suggested through clear guidelines, safe harbor provisions for teachers acting in good faith, and mandatory orientation for parents and students. Finally, more parent-teacher bonding activities—including family days, PTA meetings, Brigada Eskwela, and home visitation programs—were proposed to foster positive interactions and strengthen relationships.

Implications

The findings of this study reveal that building teacher-learner connections in Asuncion District is constrained by overcrowded classrooms, excessive paperwork, training-related absences, student fear, a difficult adjustment period, and a child protection policy that has unintentionally made teachers hesitant. These findings offer several implications for school administrators, the Department of Education, policy makers, and parents.

1. Teachers would benefit from systemic support, not just recognition. With class sizes reaching 50 students and paperwork consuming 12 hours weekly, structural relief is encouraged. Reducing class sizes to 1:30 or lower, eliminating redundant reports, and assigning ancillary tasks to administrative staff are recommended actions.

2. Child protection policy should be rebalanced. The finding that students threaten "mapreso ka" while teachers avoid discipline suggests that vague policy language harms both parties. Clearer guidelines, safe harbor provisions, and mandatory orientation for parents and students are encouraged.

3. Parent-teacher bonding activities are essential infrastructure. When children see parents and teachers laughing together at family days or Brigada, they perceive the teacher as safe. Schools are encouraged to budget and schedule PTA meetings, conferences, and home visits rather than treating them as optional.

4. Teacher training is encouraged to include emotional connection skills. Teachers requested de-escalation techniques, reading body language, and active listening. Professional development would benefit from prioritizing these relational competencies alongside curriculum content.

5. Enforcing "no disruption of classes" is recommended. Pulling teachers for trainings resets connections and frustrates parents. Scheduling professional development on in-service days or using asynchronous online modules is encouraged.

Future Directions

Based on the findings that elementary teachers face overcrowded classes, excessive paperwork, training disruptions, and policy-induced hesitancy, the following recommendations are offered to strengthen teacher-learner connections.

For School Administrators. Reduce class sizes to 1:30 or lower by requesting additional teachers or classrooms. Limit paperwork and non-teaching tasks. Schedule trainings on in-service days only. Organize regular family days, PTA meetings, and Brigada.

For the Department of Education (DepEd). Issue a policy to lower class sizes gradually. Reduce redundant reports and implement paperless systems. Require emotional connection training in professional development. Clarify child protection guidelines with safe harbor provisions and mandatory parent/student orientation.

For Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs). Integrate courses on building teacher-learner relationships, positive reinforcement, and managing large classes. Train pre-service teachers in

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code-switching and translanguaging for diverse linguistic backgrounds.

For Parents and PTAs. Attend school events to show children that teachers are trusted allies. Reinforce teacher authority at home. Communicate openly with teachers and use child protection complaints responsibly.

For Future Researchers. Conduct quantitative studies correlating class size with relationship quality. Use longitudinal designs to track connections over the school year. Test specific strategies. Include student voices directly in future research

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