



## **Opportunities Encountered by the Teachers in the New Normal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research aimed to examine the lived experiences of Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers, focusing on the opportunities they encountered while teaching during the pandemic. This research employed a qualitative method and a hermeneutic phenomenological approach centered on how the 30 teacher participants from three elementary schools interpret their world within their given context. This study also used a combination of open-ended questionnaires and extensive interviews to gather data from the participants. The findings revealed eight essential themes that emerged from the analysis, namely: Theme 1: ECE teachers have become more flexible and adaptable; Theme 2: ECE teachers have become more creative, innovative, and critical; Theme 3: ECE teachers have aimed for self-development; Theme 4: ECE teachers have become team players; Theme 5: ECE teachers have become technologically oriented; Theme 6: ECE teachers have assumed multifaceted roles; Theme 7: ECE teachers have become research-driven; Theme 8: ECE teachers have gained global and local perspectives. It is concluded that the teachers have varied opportunities and positive experiences in the new normal of education despite working amid the pandemic. The teachers rise above challenges by converting hardships into opportunities in their favor. Nevertheless, the challenges encountered by the teachers before, during, and after the pandemic should not be neglected. Policymakers and decision-makers are highly encouraged to develop proactive measures and solutions for potential problems in teaching during future tumultuous situations.

Keywords: *New Normal, Early Childhood Education (ECE) Teachers, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, opportunities, lived experiences*

### **Introduction**

The global health crisis brought by the new coronavirus strain SARS-CoV-2 is a threatening worldwide public health disaster that has raised significant issues and concerns. As the leading agency, the World Health Organization (WHO) considered COVID-19 a global pandemic, and many nations declared a pandemic crisis. Organizations, corporations, and commercial activities have been halted and temporarily shut down across the globe.

Similarly, people, commodities, and some essential services were hindered from traversing across international, national, and local boundaries. To avoid illness transmission and decrease mortality, the WHO has advised various approaches, including practicing social distancing, using face masks, handwashing, self-isolation, and an enhanced healthcare management system.

The emergence of the COVID-19 virus has also caused significant changes and adjustments in the learning and teaching landscape of the new normal. Within this context, there has been a shift from traditional in-person classrooms to alternative forms of learning like distance, blended, and homeschooling modes of educational delivery. Educators started getting ready for modular and online distance education and a combination of these approaches. Teachers also upgraded their technological skills to address the modifications introduced by the new educational framework in response to the new norm, assuming that learning will always move forward despite any situation.

Conversely, teaching is achievable yet has challenges. It is safe to assert that the educational field is among the most impacted by the worldwide effects of the pandemic in various dimensions across continents. Schools at all levels, from primary to tertiary education, have risen to the top of the list of places most susceptible to health, safety, and overall security risks. In fact, due to the potential endangerment of the well-being of school employees, learners, parents, and other involved parties, educational institutions were temporarily shut down to manage the transmission of the virus and lower the statistics of infections.

In the Philippines, educational authorities were compelled to discover ways of consistently delivering high-quality teaching and learning to all learners throughout the various levels of education. Within basic education, the Department of Education (DepEd) provided a range of learning methods that school regions, divisions, districts, or schools can choose based on geographic location, socioeconomic conditions, and learner proficiency. These learning approaches are designed to accommodate the diverse needs of learners from various backgrounds.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the education field, leading to several changes. These changes have presented both challenges and opportunities and the need for adjustments for educators, particularly those in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Several studies have explored educators' experiences during the pandemic, providing valuable insights into their challenges, opportunities, and coping mechanisms.

Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison's (2020) study on the challenges and opportunities of online teaching during the pandemic is a notable example, benefiting teacher education programs. Agayon et al. (2022) investigated teachers' challenges and coping mechanisms during the new normal, offering a comprehensive view of their resilience. Their research is crucial for understanding teaching in crises. Similarly, Cadiz-Gabejan et al. (2022) emphasized educators' need for flexibility, resourcefulness, and passion in adapting to pandemic-induced learning environments. Their findings underscore these qualities' significance in education, especially during unprecedented challenges.

Furthermore, Patil & Patil's (2022) research highlights the significance of promoting the ongoing utilization of online tools for teaching and learning in the new normal, signaling the potential for transformative innovation within education. Additionally, Solekhah's (2020) work offers a perspective on the challenges and opportunities specific to early childhood education amidst the pandemic, emphasizing the imperative for inventive pedagogical approaches and understanding of students' unique characteristics. Similarly, Yıldırım's (2021) research, which examines explicitly preschool education in Turkey during the Covid-19 pandemic, provides valuable insights into the experiences of educators within this particular context, further enriching people's understanding of the evolving educational landscape.

While the studies discussed above have provided valuable insights into the teachers' various experiences during the pandemic, there is still a need to conduct a comprehensive qualitative study that focuses explicitly on the opportunities encountered and highlights the positive experiences met by ECE teachers in teaching during the pandemic in the Philippine context. Understanding opportunities such as how educators have leveraged technology, adapted teaching methodologies and fostered resilience in young learners can provide valuable lessons for the future direction of ECE, especially in the teaching and learning process. Presumably, more opportunities and other positive experiences can be explored based on the actual narratives of the teachers; thus, this study was conducted.

This research aimed to fill the gap by conducting a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of ECE teachers in terms of opportunities encountered in the new normal. By synthesizing the findings of existing studies and conducting new qualitative research, this paper sought to provide an understanding of the opportunities encountered by ECE teachers during the pandemic. The insights gained from this research can inform teacher training programs, curriculum development, and policy-making to better support ECE educators in navigating future opportunities and challenges.

Lastly, this study endeavored to add to the burgeoning body of science concerning novel viewpoints on education during the worldwide pandemic. These novel viewpoints could provide insights that could lay the foundation for designing a program to enhance and maintain quality education within elementary education, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic but also in any future similar circumstances.

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## Research Methodology

This section provides the research design, environment, participants, sampling design, instruments, data-gathering procedure, and data analysis following the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to obtain descriptions of the experiences of the target participants.

### *Design*

This qualitative research adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which centered on understanding how the participants make meaning of their surroundings within their specific situation. A qualitative investigation is geared toward comprehending the meaning that people have made for themselves, that is, how individuals make sense of their reality and the experiences they have while living in it; in other words, how people construct meaning for themselves (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Hennink et al., 2020; Silverman, 2022).

This study involved a series of collecting, coding, examining, categorizing, and presenting relevant information regarding prevailing situations, practices, principles, processes, convictions, inclinations, and cause-effect relations, followed by providing satisfactory and precise interpretations concerning the pertinent data without utilizing statistical means. It captured the participants' narrative accounts, reflecting on how they interpreted and expressed their encounters through questionnaires and interviews designed to describe their lived experiences. It aimed to interpret the meaning from these data by providing vignettes that could help readers understand the research goal by studying the targeted participants and context.

Specifically, Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological framework was utilized to come up with specific descriptions of the essence of the narratives. This approach helped the researchers differentiate the structured teaching opportunities in ECE within public elementary schools. Hermeneutic phenomenology studies emerged as a dynamic interaction linking six investigation procedures in human science. The involved procedures comprised the following steps: firstly, delving into the inherent nature of the experiences encountered and secondly, exploring these experiences as they were lived. This step was followed by contemplating the central phenomenon's main themes. Then, the central phenomenon will be portrayed using the creative writing and rewriting process. Next, upholding a steadfast and target-driven connection to the central phenomenon and striking a balance within the inquiry setting by duly considering both the individual portions and the overarching entirety (Van Manen, 1990).

### *Environment*

This study was conducted in three selected public elementary schools in Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu, Philippines. These schools used blended, pure online, and modular learning delivery modalities. The schools' identification was not made available when discussing the findings and was strictly kept confidential in the data analysis. These schools were chosen because they have a bigger learner population and more teachers teaching ECE. Additionally, for convenience, these schools are located within the school division where the researchers work, allowing for smoother and easier data gathering. The research environment was safe, secure, convenient, and conducive for the researchers and participants within the time intended for answering the questionnaire and interview.

### Participants

The study's research participants were the teachers who had been handling Kindergarten up to Grade three level for at least five years in the three selected schools. Moreover, these teachers were teaching at the three selected schools at the time of data gathering and were willing to share their experiences teaching during the pandemic. Table 1 projects the distribution of the study participants.

**Table 1**

#### Distribution of the Research Participants

Name of School	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
School A	10	33.33
School B	10	33.33
School C	10	33.33
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

It was projected that 30 participants would be an adequate sample size who could adequately tackle the research inquiries and unveil diverse perspectives. This research set the baseline number of 30 participants, equally divided among the selected three schools. However, the final number of participants was decided when no new information emerged from the interviews with the participants. The study data was saturated upon interviewing eight to nine participants from each school. However, for research rigor purposes, the researchers made it to ten participants for each school. It was crucial to optimize the probability that every participant could contribute information enabling the revelation of the essence and significance of the phenomenon under investigation.

In order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, the schools they were working with and their identities were omitted from the data presentation. Data was gathered outside their work schedules through in-person or online platforms. Coding was applied to participants' responses, identified as *P1* through *P30*.

### Sampling Design

This study utilized the purposive sampling technique, also called purposeful, selective, judgmental, or subjective sampling. In this method, the researcher intentionally chooses participants from the sampling frame to meet the study's specific objectives and desired attributes (Crossman, 2018). Purposive sampling involves searching the entire population for individuals with particular characteristics, experiences, knowledge, skills, and exposure to specific events (Black, 2023).

In this approach, the researcher identifies vital characteristics and criteria for the study and then seeks out willing participants who can provide the necessary information based on their knowledge or experiences (Bernard, 2002; Lewis & Sheppard, 2006). The researchers began with a specific set of traits to investigate and then actively sought out study subjects who exhibited the full range of these desired characteristics.

By employing purposive sampling, the study ensured that participants were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and the specific aspects under examination. This method allowed for targeted data collection and enhanced the study's ability to gain meaningful insights from individuals with the required knowledge and experiences pertinent to the study's focus.

Regarding the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as a requirement to qualify as a participant, all participants had to be teaching in ECE, which meant teachers teaching from kindergarten up to third grade in the three selected public elementary institutions in mainland Lapu-Lapu City. There was no age or gender requirement, but only ECE teachers with a minimum of five years of teaching experience in public schools could participate. Only those who met the stipulated required minimum requirement could qualify as participants.

### Instruments

In most qualitative research endeavors, the principal instrument employed to gather data is the researchers themselves. Within this context, researchers utilized their sensory faculties to apprehend the study subjects, internalizing them within their consciousness. These perceptions subsequently transform into phenomenological representations for later interpretation (Dodgson, 2019). Through the researchers' skillful engagement, an environment for dialogue is established—a space where participants feel secure disclosing narratives concerning their personal experiences and life contexts (Cypress, 2018). The researchers' capacity to keenly observe everyday particulars, conduct in-depth interviews, and engage in reflective analysis of both observational and interview data assumed pivotal significance in ensuring the success of this research endeavor.

This research also utilized a combination of in-depth interviews and questionnaire methods of data collection. There are some gaps and lapses in using a questionnaire that could be supplemented by conducting in-depth interviews (Braun et al., 2021; Kern, 2018). Thus, the researchers deemed it necessary to use both. Furthermore, the interviews provided this research with dense data that the questionnaires could not reasonably offer.

To ensure the research instrument's dependability and credibility, triangulation was employed to establish its validity and reliability. Triangulation entailed utilizing diverse data sources, investigators, methodologies, or theories whenever possible to provide corroborative evidence and validation. The research instruments were pilot-tested. Suggestions and enhancements were implemented, resulting in the revision and refinement of the questionnaires prior to the initiation of the data-gathering process.

Additionally, to aid the researchers in the data collection process, tools such as a video recorder, an audio recorder, a pen, and a journal were used to precisely document the responses of the research participants. Depending on the COVID-19 situation and restrictions, in-person or virtual interview platforms were also employed.

#### ***Data-gathering Procedure***

The data-gathering procedure officially started after receiving approval from the principals of the three selected schools. The researchers created a letter of invitation to participate and a consent form for the approval of the target participants. Responding to the questionnaire took around 30 minutes, and the in-depth interviews took 30 minutes of the participants' time. The researchers' availability during the data collection process was highly needed for participants' guidance and clarification regarding the research questions.

The questionnaire was administered in both paper-based and web-based formats. Face-to-face and online interview options were available for the participants via Zoom, Skype, or Messenger. These procedures were carried out after classes or during free time to avoid disrupting classes or work responsibilities.

In summary, participants' responses were captured through the research instruments. The data from the questionnaire were substantiated by the interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Lastly, the final data underwent multiple readings to acquire an overall understanding, initiating the data analysis process. Vignettes derived from the interviews will be used in the analysis of data to support findings.

#### ***Data Analysis***

The researchers employed a fusion of the seven steps within the analytic procedures or data analysis delineated in Colaizzi (1978) to steer the data analysis procedure. The seven steps were operationally used in the context of the study: (1) closely reading all interview contents; (2) extracting and noting significant participant statements; (3) formulating meanings based on these statements; (4) organizing these meanings into various thematic clusters; (5) integrating these thematic clusters into a comprehensive description; (6) defining the essential structure of the identified phenomenon through a precise statement; and (7) returning to the interviewees for additional information and discussion. These seven steps were procedurally and contextually used in the study to develop significant findings and analysis.

#### ***Ethical Considerations***

In addition to adhering to the demands of qualitative research, several ethical concerns were also considered to guarantee a scholarly and ethical research process. This study integrated principles from the Belmont Report taken from Adashi et al. (2018) and the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) taken from Anabo et al. (2019) as ethical guides of this study. These sources collectively encompassed ethical standards and guidelines for research involving human subjects and guided this research to develop a reliable outcome.

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## **Results and Discussion**

This part provides the necessary data from analyzing and interpreting the participants' responses to the questionnaire and interview. To complete this study correctly, it was necessary to analyze the data collected following the steps in hermeneutic phenomenology to fulfill the research's primary objective or answer its domain of inquiry.

Specifically, this part presents the themes and interpretative descriptions of the phenomenon of teaching ECE in public elementary schools, focusing on the opportunities, which include the strengths and other positive experiences encountered by the teachers within the framework of the teaching and learning process in the context of the new normal in education.

Eight essential themes emerged, and the following are the major themes gathered from the examination of the relevant data taken from the participants' responses in the open-ended questionnaire and the in-depth interview. Figure 1 presents the schematic presentation of the themes derived from the participants' data.

#### **Figure 1**

#### **Schematic Presentation of the Emergent Themes**



**Theme 1: ECE teachers have become more flexible and adaptable.**

The education sector had to swiftly modify teaching methods and operational procedures (Corlatean, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). Early childhood education teachers have encountered substantial shifts in their approach to teaching young children amid the pandemic (Szente, 2020). These changes necessitate greater flexibility and adaptability among ECE teachers. They undergo holistic modifications, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptations to effectively support the teaching and learning process amidst unprecedented teaching conditions (Negrette et al., 2022).

Even without sufficient guidance and support from school leaders and administrators, ECE teachers have successfully adapted to new modes of lesson delivery, such as online teaching, thriving during the pandemic and gaining increased confidence over time (Mckenna et al., 2021). ECE teachers have embraced innovative teaching, such as using technology amid many challenges during the world health crisis (de Silva, 2021).

In this new normal education paradigm, flexibility and adaptability are crucial attributes for ECE teachers. Flexibility involves swiftly adjusting teaching plans and integrating feedback from educational leaders. Adaptability is about navigating change effectively, including adjusting to evolving roles and time demands. Both qualities are essential for providing young learners with the best possible learning experience.

In the ECE classroom, flexibility is essential. Embracing constructive feedback and adjusting teaching strategies, if necessary, may be challenging but is significant for professional growth and development. ECE teachers must continuously evolve their teaching approaches, especially in challenging circumstances like the pandemic, where disruptions are expected. Adaptability is also essential, as teachers may need to take on various roles and tasks brought on by the changes in the educational landscape. Staying attuned to the latest technological advancements and using them effectively for the benefit of learners may require adjusting instructional approaches. Adaptability also involves effectively reacting to change, novelty, and uncertainty by modifying thinking, behaviors, and emotions to navigate various situations.

While meticulous lesson planning has traditionally been emphasized to cover all the necessary topics, teachers should recognize that the quality of instruction is more important than the volume of content covered. Responding to learners' needs, adjusting activities, and providing breaks when necessary can lead to better classroom engagement and outcomes.

The discussion above is supported by the responses of *Participant 12*, *Participant 17*, *Participant 26*, and *Participant 29*:

*“During these tough times, what my pupils really liked was how I cared about them. They were happy when I stopped the class to ask how they were doing and if they needed any help, even if it meant we used up few minutes of our learning time. Teaching online and with modules made it harder to connect with pupils, but I have learned that those few minutes were the best for getting closer to my pupils.” (P12)*

*“Teachers need to be able to change and adjust in every part of teaching and learning. It is tough, especially during the pandemic, but we have to roll with it, go with the flow, and move with the beat.” (P17)*

*“Since the pandemic hit, everything in my life has turned around. Personally, in my family, and at work – it is all different now. At my job, I had to switch up how I teach and the methods I use. The old ways just do not work in this new way of teaching.” (P26)*

*"I think being adaptable is not too hard when you know your job as a teacher. I am used to handling all sorts of learners, so I have learned to be flexible and adjust to what each of them needs."* (P29)

Flexibility for ECE teachers is not about accepting late submissions or excuses but about creating a dynamic learning environment that empowers learners. It involves knowing when to adapt and modify lesson plans, especially considering students' diverse backgrounds, especially during crises like the pandemic. Being flexible allows ECE teachers to make learning meaningful by adjusting activities to meet the unique needs of each learner. Quality engagement is more important than the quantity of tasks completed, and true dedication is measured by the richness of activities and active learner involvement. Flexibility and adaptability are essential for teachers aiming to foster curiosity and cognitive engagement among learners. These qualities enable educators to tailor instruction, provide constructive feedback, and create assessments that cater to each learner's unique requirements.

The discussion above is supported by the statements of *Participant 2*, *Participant 5*, *Participant 13*, and *Participant 19* respectively:

*"Life is full of unknowns – we cannot foresee the future or know what is coming next. What matters is that as early childhood teachers, we are set and geared up to handle any unexpected situation that comes our way. This is where our ability to be flexible and adaptable really shines."* (P2)

*"A lot of people believe that teaching younger kids is quite challenging, and they are right. Teachers in early childhood education need a bunch of different skills for teaching little ones. Our job is to lay down the basics for these learners. To do that, we have got to have the right know-how and be ready to adapt."* (P5)

*"Being flexible does not mean being too chill or too soft as an ECE teacher. It means being able to do your teacher job well even when things are tough, like during the COVID-19 pandemic."* (P13)

*"As ECE teachers, we need to be ready for anything and go with the flow. Having a backup plan is smart, in case our main plan does not work out."* (P19)

Adaptability is a crucial skill for teachers as they constantly face changes, new challenges, and uncertainties in their work lives. They must adjust to various learners, handle unforeseen classroom situations, adapt to changing schedules, engage with diverse colleagues and parents, and incorporate new knowledge from professional development into their teaching methods. Being adaptable means modifying the pace of a lesson, managing frustration when things do not go as planned, or adjusting collaborative approaches with new colleagues. This skill significantly impacts teachers' ability to handle the challenges of their profession and contributes to their well-being.

Adaptability has become crucial for educators in the ever-changing teaching landscape to prevent burnout and disinterest. Addressing adaptability can help bolster the well-being of ECE teachers and enhance teacher retention, as some educators have opted for early retirement or pursued opportunities abroad due to the demanding nature of the profession.

This contention is supported by the statements of *Participant 4* and *Participant 28* respectively:

*"Amid the pandemic, lots of teachers decided to leave their jobs or go overseas because they could not handle the stress and workload of teaching, especially when the pay does not match the hard work. Those of us who are still here are the ones who can adjust well, because we are managing to keep going despite the challenges brought by the pandemic."* (P4)

*"Being adaptable is super important. We have got to be flexible with new surroundings and handle situations we have never faced. Our job is to teach kids, even when things are tough like during the pandemic or other tough times."* (P28)

In pursuit of a more personalized approach to education, the traditional 20th-century classroom model gave way to a learner-centered environment. This shift stemmed from a drive to optimize each learner's potential and enhance their self-awareness. The transformation reflected a recognition that tailoring the learning experience to individual needs could lead to more effective education outcomes and empower learners to better understand themselves and their abilities.

The discussion above is supported by the statements of *Participant 3* and *Participant 14*:

*"During my time, 20 years ago, we were like kings and queens in our own classrooms. Whatever we said, the pupils would always follow. We were in charge back then. We did not have problems with slow learners because they would make an effort to catch up on their own. Now we have to cater to the specific needs of the learners and pattern our teaching to their learning styles."* (P3)

*"There is a significant difference nowadays, requiring us to take into account the various learning styles and preferences of our pupils. It is crucial that no one is overlooked. We must be adaptable in designing our curriculum to suit the diverse needs of learners in the current educational landscape."* (P14)

Moreover, owing to the pervasive accessibility of digital devices, learners could engage in numerous activities independently, often without direct guidance from an educator. However, this dynamic placed an additional responsibility on teachers to cultivate a close relationship with their learners. This entailed understanding their requirements, strengths, and areas for improvement while also considering how technology influenced their lives. This collaborative approach ensured teachers could provide tailored support, foster holistic growth, and effectively navigate the evolving educational landscape.

To strengthen the claim above, *Participant 13* and *Participant 26* expressed that:

*"Recently, learners possess greater technological or ICT knowledge compared to educators. This situation should not persist; we should be at the forefront of our learners. While learning is a mutual process, and we also gain knowledge from our learners, the primary role is to instruct them, not the other way around, in most instances." (P13)*

*"Teachers should continue to provide guidance to learners in their online distance and modular learning, but we should also allow them to explore and discover things independently with our support." (P26)*

In the new education landscape, ECE teachers have embraced flexibility and adaptability, especially in response to the adversities brought by the pandemic. They have evolved from mere knowledge dispensers to navigators of uncertainty, architects of innovation, and champions of resilience. The pandemic pushed ECE teachers to transform their teaching approaches from traditional classrooms to dynamic, innovative learning environments. They reevaluated their methods and reinvented pedagogical strategies, demonstrating remarkable resilience in ensuring continuity of education through non-traditional platforms.

Flexibility and adaptability extended beyond pedagogy, encompassing troubleshooting technical issues and finding innovative ways to engage learners. ECE teachers emerged as symbols of strength in an era of uncertainty, committing to providing quality education regardless of circumstances. Their flexibility and adaptability are not just a response to challenges but a testament to their dedication to shaping the minds of future generations. With flexible and adaptable ECE teachers leading the way, the future of learning remains promising, even in the face of adversity.

***Theme 2: ECE teachers have become more creative, innovative, and critical.***

Academic institutions have been obliged to address the challenges brought by the pandemic by promptly and appropriately restructuring their operations to maintain educational delivery and ensure the continuity of student academic progress (Amir et al., 2020). During the pandemic, teachers quickly transitioned to virtual teaching. Virtual teaching occurs in an online learning environment, utilizing technological tools such as computers, laptops, tablets, cell phones, and the Internet. This approach enables continued learning despite the absence of a physical classroom and synchronized time (Cojocariu et al., 2014, in Dhawan, 2020). Teachers, in particular, are encouraged to rethink education and prioritize humanizing the learning process by focusing on students' needs as much as possible (Dhawan, 2020). These realities have allowed teachers to be more creative, innovative, and critical in their curricular approach and strategies to cope with the demands of the challenging times.

In the modern educational landscape, embracing creativity, innovation, and critical thinking is paramount for educators worldwide. Innovation in education goes beyond technology, involving constantly refining teaching methodologies and creating practical learning experiences. ECE teachers play a crucial role in nurturing creativity and innovation in young minds, tailoring their efforts to each child's unique interests. They introduce interdisciplinary and experiential learning, fostering a holistic approach that equips learners for a multifaceted job market or higher education. The traditional educational paradigm needs to be revised in a world marked by digital revolutions, urbanization, climate change, and unpredictability.

ECE educators guide learners in cultivating unconventional thinking, preparing them for an evolving job market. Creativity and critical thinking are essential skills for learners, enabling them to thrive beyond the classroom. A creative classroom environment engages learners and allows them to apply theoretical concepts in real-life scenarios. Proficient ECE teachers lay the foundation for a journey of exploration, discovery, and skill development that prepares learners for success in an ever-evolving world.

These claims are supported by the statements of *Participant 1, Participant 3, Participant 4, and Participant 18*:

*"For instance, if you are a public school teacher assigned in a remote area, you must employ creativity and innovation. Resources may be scarce, but that should not hinder you from being an effective educator." (P1)*

*"If you do not have a projector, resort to traditional methods such as using manila paper or other accessible materials. Embrace creativity! Explore alternative ways to deliver your lessons." (P3)*

*"As the age-old saying goes, as a teacher, you are the most effective visual aid. There are numerous methods to keep your class engaging and not monotonous." (P4)*

*"There are numerous approaches to accomplish your goals. Encourage your creative ideas to flow freely and endeavor to enhance the current situation by introducing innovations." (P18)*

In the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE), the ability to think critically and creatively is not just an asset but a fundamental requirement for educators. Critical thinking dissects challenges, while creative thinking drives innovative solutions. Educators with exceptional creative thinking skills can devise novel solutions beyond existing approaches. Creative educators introduce fresh perspectives and solutions while others are stuck between established options. This creative thinking allows them to transcend current limitations and find innovative solutions, making it indispensable for ECE teachers. In the 21st century, ECE teachers must embody traits like creativity, innovation, initiative, and adaptability to address complex challenges. Learners also need motivation and confidence to effectively employ critical and creative thinking methods.

The harmonious interplay of critical and creative thinking empowers ECE teachers to guide learners in becoming proactive problem-solvers and resourceful thinkers in a complex and changing world. ECE teachers excel when they combine analytical and creative thinking to enrich learning. ECE teachers foster an environment where learners engage in critical thinking skills such as interpretation, analysis, assessment, reasoning, and more. These skills form the foundation for learners to engage with complex subjects thoughtfully.

ECE teachers are pivotal in guiding learners to generate and apply novel ideas. They encourage learners to perceive situations differently, discover alternative explanations, and forge new connections through creative thinking. Various creative outputs, from complex representations to virtual reality, are used to ignite learners' imaginative faculties. ECE teachers act as catalysts for young minds, fueling their capacity for innovation and originality. By integrating a spectrum of creative outputs, teachers create an environment where learners actively contribute to their own learning.

The following statements below from *Participant 2*, *Participant 5*, *Participant 16*, *Participant 17*, and *Participant 28* support the discussion above.

*"Teachers must engage in critical thinking to make informed decisions. They should also harness their creativity to develop effective teaching materials."* (P2)

*"The COVID-19 pandemic necessitates logical and creative thinking from everyone. In the realm of education, we, as teachers, must empower our pupils to be critical thinkers and media-literate, particularly in the use of social media. Our role is to guide them in expressing their creativity appropriately."* (P5)

*"I have observed that many learners are susceptible to misinformation, readily believing content from unreliable sources. With critical thinking skills, they can discern fake news."* (P16)

*"In this era of misinformation, critical thinking holds immense significance. Teachers serve as essential role models, encouraging pupils to engage in logical thinking as they adapt to the new normal."* (P17)

*"Creative thinking empowers pupils to discover alternative solutions to problems. When conventional approaches fail, creativity enables them to explore new avenues for problem-solving. Unfortunately, some learners tend to give up without attempting alternatives."* (P28)

During the pandemic, ECE teachers have been resilient and inspirational figures. Their creativity, innovation, and critical thinking skills have not only helped them navigate new educational challenges but have also transformed the learning experiences of young students. They embraced technology, devised innovative teaching methods, and demonstrated adaptability in uncertainty, turning adversity into opportunity. Despite the challenges, their commitment to nurturing young minds remained steadfast. They proved that even in difficult times, the power of creativity, innovation, and critical thinking knows no limits. Through their efforts, ECE teachers have shown that challenges can be turned into opportunities, lighting the way for a brighter and more enriched educational future.

### ***Theme 3: ECE teachers have aimed for self-development.***

The critical importance of fostering the overall development of ECE teachers is now widely acknowledged as a collective professional responsibility within the field of Early Childhood Education (Cumming & Wong, 2018). This necessity has become even more apparent in the context of COVID-19. The role of early childhood educators is intricate and multi-dimensional, necessitating a dedication to ongoing improvement, resilience, and the readiness to tackle numerous challenges (Beltman et al., 2019; Irvine et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2018).

Lifelong learning is essential for personal and professional growth. It is crucial for educators, especially due to dynamic shifts in teaching methods and technology. Being a lifelong learner means continually seeking knowledge for personal and professional reasons. Teachers play a pivotal role as knowledge conduits, but the best ones continually seek new insights for teaching and personal growth.

Embracing lifelong learning is imperative, as education is ever-evolving. Educators must adapt to changing teaching methodologies and the rapid evolution of technology. Traditional approaches are transforming profoundly, and understanding learners' unique needs is essential. Contemporary careers, including education, change rapidly, necessitating perpetual learning. Both learners and educators must embrace lifelong learning to stay effective and relevant.

ECE teachers, in particular, must acquire proficiency in emerging technologies to keep pace with the modern world. The shift from physical to online education is significant, with platforms like Zoom and Google Meet becoming essential. ECE teachers must adapt their teaching methods, encompassing academic and non-academic aspects. Engaging learners in this changing landscape requires ECE teachers to be navigators, guiding them toward holistic development in a technology-driven age.

ECE teachers, as role models, inspire learners to embrace lifelong learning. Their dedication fosters a positive outlook and a commitment to continuous learning. For ECE teachers, every day offers an opportunity for fresh insights, fueling motivation and enriching the classroom experience. Lifelong learning invigorates teachers and makes teaching more impactful and dynamic. Exemplary ECE educators continuously learn and adapt to evolving demands, even more so during the pandemic, enhancing their expertise and teaching prowess.

The following quotations from *Participant 6*, *Participant 11*, *Participant 20*, and *Participant 27* can substantiate the discussion above.

*"Some teachers retired with the lowest rank, Teacher I, while others retired as Instructors or Assistant Professors in state colleges and universities. They did not prioritize continuous learning, failing to upgrade their knowledge through training, seminars, and graduate studies to attain higher ranks."* (P6)

*"Even though pursuing my master's degree was exhausting, challenging, and demanding, I persevered because it allowed me to acquire new knowledge beneficial for my teaching."* (P11)

*"In the past, only a few teachers pursued graduate studies, but today, many, especially newcomers, are actively engaged in it. To meet the demands of the current times, given the new basic education curriculum and the challenges of the new normal, we must adapt by continuously learning."* (P20)



*"Learning is an ongoing journey. Age should never deter you from acquiring new knowledge. All it takes is an open mind and patience, particularly when it comes to technology." (P27)*

ECE teachers stand as a testament to the idea that learning knows no bounds. As nurturers of young minds, they embrace the role of continuous learners with unwavering dedication. In their quest to provide the best possible foundation for their learners, they willingly adapt to emerging pedagogical techniques, stay attuned to evolving child development theories, and constantly seek opportunities for professional growth. Each day in the classroom becomes an opportunity to impart knowledge and gain insights, fostering a culture of curiosity and exploration. ECE teachers embody the spirit of lifelong learning, illuminating the path to a brighter future for the youngest learners and igniting a passion for knowledge that accompanies them on their journeys of discovery.

**Theme 4: ECE teachers have become team players.**

Leaders and followers are essential to the success of organizations, including educational institutions (Essa & Allatari, 2019; Oyetunji, 2013; Zogjani & Llaci, 2014). Leaders are the proactive figures within the educational system, while followers respond and support the system (Hinić et al., 2017). Followership allows individuals to find job satisfaction by aiding leaders in achieving organizational objectives (Kelley, 2008). Leaders and followers are mutually dependent, with followers influencing leaders (Henry, 2012). Effective followers exhibit cooperation and collaboration (Chaleff, 1995), and the ideal follower can maintain organizational performance (Blackshear, 2003). Teachers play leadership and followership roles, making them good team players in their academic institutions. Collaboration among all educational key players is vital for dynamic interaction between leaders and followers in education.

Collaboration among ECE teachers is paramount for fostering a positive learning environment and effective communication. Technology facilitates swift information exchange, enriching teaching and learning. ECE teachers transitioned from traditional teacher-centered instruction to a digital realm, where information is readily accessible to learners. Collaboration, online resources, and diverse perspectives empower teachers to become team leaders and collaborators, equipping learners with proficiency in a broad range of skills. Although collaboration is widely acknowledged as beneficial, some schools need help to allocate sufficient time for it.

Meaningful collaboration has advantages in advocating school improvement. Collaboration builds connections among ECE teachers, fostering a sense of belonging and positively influencing school culture, ultimately benefiting learner experiences. Regular team meetings allow dynamic idea-sharing and task distribution, enhancing efficiency. Integrating data into meetings provides comprehensive insights for informed decision-making. Cross-curricular teamwork among teachers, such as English and social studies teachers collaborating, elevates learning challenges and enriches their understanding of diverse learners, improving support and connection.

The following statements from *Participant 11*, *Participant 15*, *Participant 23*, and *Participant 26* support the discussion above:

*"No one can thrive in isolation. During crises like a health pandemic, collaboration with colleagues and even pupils become essential for success." (P11)*

*"In the 21st century, the ability to work harmoniously with others is indispensable. Respect is the foundation upon which understanding and, subsequently, success is built." (P15)*

*"Leadership and followership are roles we all take on at different times. Regardless of your role, respecting others is crucial. Leaders should collaborate with their team members, and followers should respect and coordinate with their leaders." (P23)*

*"Being a team player is essential. The world does not revolve around any one individual. Adapting to different roles and wearing different 'masks' is necessary for survival. Adjusting your behavior to suit various environments is key, with understanding being the cornerstone." (P26)*

Technology facilitates collaboration between teachers and learners in the current educational landscape, elevating classroom activities with interactive digital materials and projects. This collaborative approach goes beyond document sharing, fostering an engaging learning experience. However, collaboration should not be limited to emails and presentations; it should extend to innovative ideas, promoting growth and creativity.

Global collaboration has the potential to reshape lives, involving both educators and learners in the learning process. ECE teachers can design activities encouraging collaboration and nurturing mutual learning and growth. Research shows collaborative learning boosts learners' confidence, self-esteem, and advanced thinking abilities. Group projects enhance social and interpersonal skills and enrich educational journeys. Through collaboration, learners develop the ability to work with diverse peers and refine their leadership skills.

The following statements from *Participant 1*, *Participant 4*, *Participant 15*, and *Participant 21* support the discussion above:

*"The current practice emphasizes collaboration with diverse individuals from various backgrounds, often yielding more favorable results. Working within groups or teams enhances the potential for achieving desired outcomes." (P1)*

*"Even if you teach at lower grade levels, there is value in collaborating with colleagues teaching different subjects or higher grades. Engaging in informal conversations with them after classes can lead to the discovery of effective teaching strategies that can be applied to your own lessons." (P4)*

*"In all our events, teamwork is the norm. Our school's administration assigns different roles, ensuring that committees cooperate closely to guarantee the success of events like graduation ceremonies." (P15)*

*"While I acknowledge that I am proficient at working independently and can be quite efficient, there are occasions when collaborating with colleagues becomes essential."* (P21)

ECE teachers embody versatility, seamlessly shifting roles as leaders, followers, and collaborators in the dynamic realm of education. They lead with unwavering dedication, guiding young minds toward a future filled with boundless possibilities. As keen followers, they observe, listen, and adapt to their learners' unique needs and aspirations, crafting a tailored educational experience. They are also consummate collaborators, working hand in hand with parents, colleagues, and communities to create a nurturing and holistic learning environment. In this intricate interconnection of leadership, followership, and collaboration, ECE teachers ignite sparks of curiosity, shape the leaders of tomorrow, and foster a community of learners while remaining steadfast in their commitment to the ever-evolving field of education.

**Theme 5: ECE teachers have become technologically oriented.**

With the closure of nearly all educational institutions worldwide, academic leaders have adopted various learning platforms and tools to ensure the continuation of education (Huang et al., 2020). The pandemic allowed teachers to innovate, developing teaching and learning solutions tailored to specific contexts. These solutions should prioritize maximizing learning through available technologies (Gurajena et al., 2021). Flexible learning provides students with choices to meet diverse needs (Huang et al., 2020).

Reports indicate that flexible learning promotes student-centered pedagogy, self-reliance, and autonomy (Kariippanon et al., 2018), helping students achieve expected outcomes (Li et al., 2020). Additionally, students have shown high engagement and have utilized various online platforms and devices for different online activities (Fortuna, 2022; Fortuna, 2023). Furthermore, Lo et al. (2021) noted that flexible learning can address academic delivery challenges and meet the needs of the pandemic. Consequently, ECE teachers should enhance and upgrade their technological skills.

Educators' knowledge and proficiency in technology are invaluable, enabling the creation of diverse and personalized learning experiences. The ability to offer differentiated learning depends on this mastery, which requires continual adaptation and learning due to technology's ever-evolving nature. Technology plays a central role in various aspects of society, including education. It is expected to permeate all aspects of the teaching and learning process progressively. Emerging technologies enhance productivity, communication, and education.

For ECE teachers, striking a balance between traditional and modern approaches is crucial. Blended learning, combining both, has become a strategy for effectively incorporating technology into the classroom. ECE teachers must stay updated on technological shifts, experiment with new tools, and optimize multimedia content for increased engagement and retention. Technology's judicious integration enriches the educational experience and inspires tech-savvy educators to enhance curricula and lesson plans.

The following statements from Participant 4, Participant 6, and Participant 19 support the discussion above:

*"I am a young teacher, so I am pretty comfortable with technology. I use different gadgets and computer stuff in my classes. My pupils really like my lessons. Technology helps me teach in this new way of learning."* (P4)

*"You should use educational apps, videos, and online tools along with regular books and stuff. It helps pupils learn better, especially during tough times like now."* (P6)

*"I am not great with technology, but I know it can help our pupils learn. I usually learn about new technologies by myself first before using it in class. Practice makes perfect!"* (P19)

Nowadays, ECE teachers enthusiastically embrace learning new technologies to address modern challenges. The realm of new technologies is open to all, from novice to experienced educators, fostering advancements in teaching. ECE teachers recognize the potential of technology to help learners excel, with administrators playing a pivotal role in facilitating skill development. Integrating technology streamlines teachers' responsibilities, boosting efficiency without increasing their workload. Technology has transformed the learning experience for students, providing quick access to information, expedited learning, and engaging platforms to apply knowledge. It empowers learners to explore new subjects and grasp complex concepts more deeply.

The following statements from Participant 3, Participant 10, and Participant 16 support the discussion above:

*"DepEd has given new tablets to learners to help them learn, and some schools have received them. So, teachers need to learn how to use technology."* (P3)

*"You are never too old to learn new things, including technology in education. It might be tough at first, but with practice, you can use it effectively in your classes."* (P10)

*"Even my two-year-old child knows how to use a cellphone. Adapt to the changes in the new normal."* (P16)

While today's learners possess access to cutting-edge technology, their utilization is often confined to interpersonal communication through chats, texts, and phone calls with family and friends. Despite being termed digital natives, many contemporary learners cannot generate digital content. Equipped with sophisticated devices capable of producing blogs, infographics, books, how-to videos, and tutorials, they still find themselves compelled to switch off these tools in the classroom, reverting to traditional modes like handouts and worksheets.

Regrettably, these conventional materials frequently end up discarded after being graded. Many learners are initially unenthusiastic about engaging with these materials, let alone preserving or revisiting them. However, when granted the opportunity, young learners empowered to harness technological advancements can create remarkable blogs, films, and digital narratives that they take pride in and eagerly share.

Empowering elementary learners to become producers transformed them into collaborators and co-creators in knowledge production. This capacity is rooted in their inherent human attributes of creativity and aspiration, enabling young learners to authentically see themselves as active contributors to the world they shaped.

The following statements from *Participant 2*, *Participant 15*, *Participant 21*, and *Participant 23* support the discussion above:

*"There are numerous bright learners out there. Our role is to guide them towards taking ownership of their learning journey. They have the capacity to generate knowledge through the use of various technological tools, even amid the challenges posed by the pandemic."* (P2)

*"Today's learners, especially during the pandemic, are highly active on social media platforms. As educators, we can harness this trend to our advantage by seamlessly incorporating educational content into these platforms. This encourages learners to create educational materials related to our lessons in the new normal."* (P15)

*"Some teachers have adopted innovative approaches, such as utilizing the TikTok app to simplify complex concepts within their subject matter. Some have even established educational YouTube channels. We can also empower pupils to create their own educational and knowledge-based social media accounts, not limited to entertainment but focused on sharing their talents and insights."* (P21)

*"The ongoing pandemic has underscored the importance of integrating educational technology into our teaching methods. Even veteran teachers have had to adapt and embrace technology as an essential tool in the new normal."* (P23)

ECE teachers are undeniably technologically driven. In today's digital age, they harness the power of technology to enrich the learning experiences of their young charges. They embrace innovative tools and digital resources with unwavering determination, seamlessly integrating them into their teaching methods. They recognize that technology is not just a supplement but an essential component of modern education, offering engaging ways to explore, create, and connect. Through their commitment to staying current with technological advancements, ECE teachers empower their learners to navigate a digital world with confidence and curiosity, ensuring that the seeds of technological literacy are sown early and nurtured for future growth.

**Theme 6: ECE teachers have assumed multifaceted roles.**

Many educational experts assert that the emerging perspectives on learning over the past decade should prompt significant changes in teaching. Nowadays, more than ever, individuals need a broad range of new skills to adapt to the rapidly evolving world (Griffin et al., 2012). While there is a general agreement on the vital role of teachers and some consensus on the nature of teaching across cultures, the essential qualities of teachers vary by country. This variation is due to the historical and cultural context-specific constraints (Caena, 2013). Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged that teachers are central to all policies aimed at enhancing the quality of schools and education (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Harris & Sass, 2011).

Teachers indeed play a crucial role as role models and life mentors to students and learners. As role models, teachers are often looked up to by their students, and their behavior and actions can significantly impact the students' attitudes and values. Additionally, as life mentors, teachers provide guidance, support, and advice to students as they navigate various challenges and decisions.

ECE teachers play dual roles as role models and mentors in the lives of their students. They inspire and lead by example, shaping learners' attitudes and values. As role models, they embody behaviors and qualities that learners aspire to emulate, promoting personal growth and integrity. Teachers also serve as mentors, establishing ongoing relationships to guide learners through challenges and provide valuable advice. Teachers are influential figures who impact learners profoundly in the ever-changing education landscape. They help students navigate complex issues and transition into responsible adults, serving as dependable sources of guidance.

Teachers, including ECE teachers, must uphold values and instill discipline while nurturing an environment that encourages self-expression, creativity, and individual talents. The role of a mentor is equally essential, fostering a professional connection that offers continuous support and cultivates a professional identity. Teacher mentors are crucial to teachers' emotional well-being, especially during challenging times like the pandemic. Ultimately, ECE teachers are profoundly responsible for shaping learners into productive citizens and virtuous individuals. Their guidance and mentorship lay the foundation for success in education and life, emphasizing values, knowledge, creativity, and innovation.

The following statements from *Participant 11*, *Participant 14*, *Participant 24*, *Participant 28*, and *Participant 29* support the discussion above.

*"In these challenging times of the pandemic, it is essential for us to be attuned to the struggles that our pupils are facing. We must lend an ear to their stories of hardships and obstacles, getting to know them on a personal level to better understand their needs."* (P11)

*"Teachers play a crucial role in guiding learners. Personally, I set aside time after homeroom to engage in informal conversations with my pupils, allowing me to build a deeper connection with them. During the pandemic, I regularly check in with my pupils through phone calls or social media to monitor their well-being and progress with their learning modules."* (P14)

*"Teachers serve as second parents to our learners. It is our responsibility to instill discipline and impart valuable life lessons, not just academic knowledge. We strive to nurture good values alongside our subject matter."* (P24)

*"At times, teachers and learners share common traits. Our behaviors and attitudes can often reflect in our learners' performance and conduct. We act as mirrors, influencing each other in the classroom."* (P28)

*"As a teacher, my duty extends beyond the classroom. I am regarded as a second parent and a role model to my pupils. Even during the pandemic, I have noticed some of my pupils venturing outside without considering the health risks. I consistently remind them to stay safe at home."* (P29)

ECE teachers embody several roles, such as being a mentor and role model with grace and dedication. As mentors, they provide invaluable guidance, nurturing their young learners' intellectual and emotional growth. With patience and empathy, they inspire curiosity and a love for learning, setting a course for lifelong education. Simultaneously, they serve as role models, exemplifying the values of kindness, respect, and a passion for knowledge. ECE teachers understand that their actions and words leave indelible impressions, shaping the character and aspirations of the next generation. With unwavering commitment, they demonstrate the profound impact that teaching, mentorship, and leading by example can have on the hearts and minds of their learners, fostering a brighter future for all.

**Theme 7: ECE teachers have become research-driven.**

Research uses rigorous scientific methods to analyze specific issues meticulously (Sharma, 2020). The teaching profession is frequently described as either research-informed or research-based, with teaching and research often seen as complementary aspects of teacher educators' roles and identities (Murray & Vanassche, 2019). It is crucial for all teachers to stay informed about developments in their field and to keep up-to-date with the latest findings in the subjects they teach (Baldwin, 2005). Therefore, conducting research is valuable for updating curricular and pedagogical knowledge and skills, particularly during the pandemic.

Education risks adopting dogmatic, theory-driven approaches, ideological biases, convenience, and prejudice without study and evidence. However, research has the power to counteract these pitfalls, providing a solid foundation for decision-making rooted in scientific evidence. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, it presents a unique opportunity for innovation and improvement in education.

The global health crisis has exacerbated economic and social challenges worldwide, including in the Philippines, where vulnerable youth have been severely affected. The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have intensified existing issues, including limited access to necessities, disrupted educational systems, elevated poverty rates, food security problems, and increased incidents of abuse, violence, and exploitation. Challenges also extended to vaccine access and distribution, revealing weaknesses in health systems.

Conducting educational research during the pandemic was a significant challenge, especially for teachers already burdened with additional responsibilities. However, this challenge was seen as an opportunity, particularly for action research addressing ongoing educational issues. Research provided ECE teachers with insights into practical strategies and their consequences, equipping them with tools to navigate unexpected situations and guide progress.

Amid these turbulent times, there was a remarkable opportunity to promote a research-based approach to education, enhancing teaching practices and providing evidence for school changes. Engaging in research contributed to professional growth and potential career advancement for ECE teachers, offering a deeper understanding of teaching and learning challenges.

Research is significant for educators, learners, and various educational stakeholders, comprehensively analyzing teaching and learning challenges. Proactive teacher involvement is crucial, with the school administration facilitating research. ECE teachers could benefit from external guidance and personalized assistance, contributing to more effective research outcomes.

The following statements from *Participant 6*, *Participant 9*, *Participant 17*, *Participant 21*, and *Participant 23* support the discussion above.

*"The current pandemic presents a valuable opportunity for school administrators and educators to engage in research. This research can pave the way for long-term solutions to the challenges we are facing. It should include various aspects, including identifying the most effective learning modalities and addressing technological needs."* P6:

*"In some fortunate schools and countries, teachers have access to ample funding for research endeavors. I recall my experience while teaching at a private school where we conducted group research and secured funding to support the entire project."* (P9)

*"Research is the cornerstone of progress and problem-solving. It is essential not only for professional growth but also for addressing the issues brought about by the pandemic. Action research, in particular, holds the key to resolving these challenges."* (P17)

*"Within the DepEd context, action research plays a crucial role. Currently, I am collaborating with fellow educators on an action research project, although we are still in the proposal stage. The acceptance or rejection of our proposal is yet to be determined."* (P21)

*"Research serves as a beacon of hope for teachers grappling with challenges and difficulties. Through research, we can uncover solutions to the problems that educators encounter."* (P23)

ECE teachers should be relentless researchers, continuously exploring the frontiers of knowledge to better serve their young charges. They pioneer the classroom, constantly seeking innovative teaching methods, current child development theories, and evidence-based practices. With an insatiable thirst for understanding, they delve into research, adapting their approaches to meet each child's unique needs. Their dedication to staying informed about the latest trends in education equips them to create dynamic and effective learning environments. In ECE, a teacher's role as a researcher is an indispensable compass, guiding them toward providing the best possible foundation for their learners' lifelong journeys of discovery and learning.

**Theme 8: ECE teachers have gained global and local perspectives.**

The well-known phrase *"Think globally, act locally"* encourages all critical players in education to engage actively in globalization and internationalization. True globalization requires a localized approach, viewing global and local aspects as distinct yet interconnected facets of the same phenomenon (Blackmore, 1999). Regarding the impact of globalization on educational concepts, the increased volume and speed of global interactions have intensified the interconnection between the local and the global, leading to significant global repercussions from local developments and vice versa (Schröttner, 2010).

The education systems in numerous countries worldwide have advocated for integrating global education goals into their curricula. The United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasized that all nations must include concepts such as sustainability education, human rights education, and intercultural and interfaith education in their school programs (UNESCO, 2006). Similarly, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2010) highlighted that high educational attainment and the capability to operate effectively globally will be crucial indicators of success in the new global economic order.

Global interconnectedness refers to recognizing that people are all connected worldwide through various domains, such as economics, politics, culture, the environment, and technology, and that our actions can have international repercussions (Merryfield, 2012). Adopting a global perspective requires teachers to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to live effectively in a world with limited natural resources and marked by ethnic diversity, cultural pluralism, and growing interdependence.

Although there is no unified approach to globalizing education, most global educators concur on teaching students to see the world as an interconnected system. This perspective emphasizes the need to understand diverse cultures, cultural interactions, and human conflicts (Merryfield & Wilson, 2005). Teachers should help students realize that they are not just citizens of their own country but also global citizens and that their actions can have international impacts.

During the COVID-19 crisis and recent technological advancements, significant changes have occurred in daily life, particularly in teaching methods. This shift has once again given rise to terms like digital natives, digital immigrants, and 21st-century educators, emphasizing the need for learners to acquire competencies beyond what machines can achieve. These competencies include creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration, all essential for success in the 21st century. Many countries have adapted their education systems to better prepare learners for unexpected crises and changing work dynamics. ECE teachers have played a crucial role in this transformation, focusing on effective partnerships within and outside of schools, seamless integration of theory and practice, and utilizing technology to enhance teaching and learning.

In this new normal, ECE teachers have harnessed technology to connect with people from diverse backgrounds, fostering language skills, cultural understanding, and communication abilities. They have broadened learners' horizons by exposing them to global issues and events, ultimately equipping them to thrive in an interconnected world while enhancing their local communities.

The following statements from *Participant 2*, *Participant 3*, *Participant 6*, *Participant 14*, *Participant 19*, *Participant 26*, and *Participant 28* support the discussion above:

*"Having previously worked in an international company before joining DepEd years ago broadened my perspective on globalization and cultural differences. I also aim to instill a globally competitive outlook in life through my lessons for my pupils."* (P2)

*"In certain countries, learners have the opportunity to study abroad for a semester or a year to expand their knowledge and learn English. Some even come to the Philippines for months to study the English language or gain exposure to real work conditions, resembling a cultural student exchange program."* (P3)

*"I firmly believe that learning should extend beyond the confines of the classroom. Even at a young age, I encourage my pupils to participate in various programs, international training sessions, and competitions to gain insights into different cultures."* (P6)

*"I aspire to offer my pupils international exposure by incorporating global perspectives into my lessons while still honoring our local identity and culture."* (P14)

*"This pandemic has reminded us that we are not isolated. It is a global challenge, and we heal as a united world. In my teaching, I draw inspiration from global discussions on how to adapt to the new normal, which I then apply to my lessons in the Philippines."* (P19)

*"Including global perspectives in your lessons is crucial. You can compare global ideas and viewpoints with our own. Learners do not necessarily need to travel abroad to stay informed about global events; they can simply search online to find answers."* (P26)

*"We should adopt a macro perspective while acting on a micro level. Learning from global perspectives is valuable, but we must customize these insights to suit our local context. How teachers handle the new normal in education abroad can serve as a blueprint for us here in the Philippines."* (P28)

ECE teachers are visionaries who think globally and act locally. They understand that their work's impact extends beyond classroom walls, influencing the future of our interconnected world. While nurturing each child's growth and development, they maintain a broader perspective, recognizing global challenges and opportunities for the next generation. Their commitment to providing a diverse and inclusive learning environment prepares young minds to be compassionate, culturally aware, and globally competent individuals. They instill values of empathy, cooperation, and environmental stewardship, empowering learners to become responsible global citizens. With each lesson and interaction, ECE teachers plant the seeds of global understanding,

teaching appreciation for the rich cultures and perspectives that make the world unique. In this way, they shape their local community's future and contribute to a brighter, more harmonious global society.

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## Conclusion

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak caused severe disruptions to global and national education service delivery and is believed to have long-term adverse effects on teaching and learning outcomes. One of the most affected stakeholders is the teachers teaching during the new normal education. This study concludes that the teachers teaching ECE in the three identified schools had encountered varied opportunities during the pandemic. They found several opportunities despite the challenges and difficulties they faced. They turned adversities into opportunities and saw difficult situations optimistically.

Although the teachers experienced several opportunities during the pandemic, the challenges they encountered should never be ignored. It is recommended that the educational sector of the Philippines, especially the primary education sector, continue to give various opportunities for teachers to become more effective and efficient in their profession. As a sequel to this initial investigation, a comprehensive study on the challenges or hardships ECE teachers face during the pandemic is recommended.

Teachers were on the frontlines of ensuring the continuity of learning, preparing for the reopening of schools for face-to-face setup, and strengthening the education system's capacity to respond to crises in the future. Given the challenging teaching environment and situations, the government may invest in these aspects by enhancing teacher development and funding necessary projects. There is also a need to enhance community involvement in education. Finally, the educational sector should heal, rise, and survive as one as they move forward to full recovery.

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