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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GRADE 3 TEACHERS AMIDST PROFICIENCY COLLAPSE

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Grade 3 teachers working amid substantial gaps between expected curriculum competencies and learners' demonstrated foundational skills. It examined teachers' pedagogical and emotional experiences, their adaptations to learner needs, their perceptions of professional identity, and the support they considered necessary. A qualitative transcendental phenomenological design informed by Moustakas was used. Ten Grade 3 teachers from public elementary schools in the Division of Samar were selected through purposive sampling, and data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed through the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen procedure, including epoche, horizontalization, clustering of invariant meaning units, construction of textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon. Five interrelated themes emerged: (1) skills gaps in reading and numeracy; (2) perceived contributors to proficiency collapse, particularly curriculum–readiness mismatch and broader systemic conditions; (3) instructional adaptation as everyday remediation through scaffolding, differentiation, peer support, remedial instruction, emotional support, and curriculum modification; (4) emotional strain and changing professional identity alongside resilience and commitment; and (5) aspirations for stronger institutional, parental, community, and policy support. The phenomenological essence of the experience is captured as resilient remediation: teachers continually reconstruct instruction around learners' immediate needs while sustaining their professional commitment despite persistent constraints. The findings indicate that teachers respond to foundational learning gaps through substantial pedagogical and emotional labor. The study highlights the need to align instructional expectations with demonstrated learner readiness while strengthening targeted foundational-skills support.

Keywords: *Grade 3 teachers; learning gaps; lived experiences; phenomenology; teacher identity*

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INTRODUCTION

Foundational literacy and numeracy are central to learners' subsequent participation in the curriculum. When children enter the middle elementary grades without secure foundational skills, teachers must simultaneously address current grade-level competencies and the prerequisite learning that should already have been established. Recent Philippine assessment evidence underscores the scale of this concern. The Second Congressional Commission on Education [EDCOM 2] (2026) reported that at least 30.52% of Grade 3 learners were classified as proficient or highly proficient in the 2024 Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Assessment (ELLNA), while the majority of learners (approximately 70%) continued to struggle with foundational skills. The same report cautioned that these figures are snapshots of different cohorts rather than longitudinal evidence of the same learners across grades.

The Philippine context has also seen targeted literacy-recovery efforts. The Philippine Information Agency (2025) reported that Department of Education data showed a 96% decline in struggling Grade 3 readers, from 51,537 to 1,871 learners classified as low-emerging readers, following the Learning Recovery Program and the Bawat Bata Makababasa Program. Such interventions illustrate both the scale of foundational learning needs and the capacity of targeted programs to address them. Nevertheless, national figures alone cannot explain how teachers experience the day-to-day consequences of learners arriving in Grade 3 with uneven reading and numeracy foundations.

For Grade 3 teachers, the problem is pedagogically consequential because classroom instruction depends on prerequisite knowledge. Learners who struggle to decode grade-level texts, or who cannot perform the basic operations required for more complex mathematical tasks, compel teachers to modify pacing, simplify materials, provide additional practice, and revisit earlier competencies. Differentiated instruction provides a framework for responding to learner variability by adjusting content, process, product, and learning environment according to learner needs (Tomlinson, 2017).

The challenge is not exclusively instructional. Teaching is an emotionally demanding profession in which teachers' relationships with learners and their interpretations of professional responsibility shape their daily work. O'Connor (2008), for example, showed that teachers' caring practices are intertwined with professional identity and emotional experience. In contexts characterized by persistent learning gaps, teachers may experience tension between institutional expectations and the practical need to respond to what learners can actually do.

Phenomenology is appropriate for examining this tension because it directs attention to how people experience a phenomenon and the meanings they attach to it. Moustakas (1994) emphasized procedures such as epoche, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, and the development of textural and structural descriptions to arrive at the essence of an experience. Rather than treating proficiency gaps solely as an outcome variable, a phenomenological inquiry can illuminate what those gaps mean in teachers' everyday pedagogical decisions, emotions, identities, and relationships with learners.

The present study uses the term "proficiency collapse" as a study-specific descriptor for the severe and persistent mismatch participants perceived between expected Grade 3 competencies and the foundational skills demonstrated by some learners. The term is not treated as an established diagnostic category. This distinction is important because the participants' accounts concern their lived experience of learning gaps, while national assessment data provide broader system-level evidence about proficiency.

Despite growing evidence about learning gaps, there remains a need to understand how Grade 3 teachers experience and interpret the phenomenon within their own classrooms, particularly in a Philippine public-school context. This study therefore explored the lived experiences of Grade 3 teachers in the Division of Samar. By centering teachers'

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accounts, it contributes a contextualized understanding of how foundational learning gaps are encountered and managed at the classroom level.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of Grade 3 teachers amidst proficiency collapse. Specifically, it examined their daily pedagogical and emotional experiences, the strategies they use to respond to learning gaps, how the experience shapes professional identity, and the forms of support they believe are necessary. It sought to:

1. Describe the daily pedagogical and emotional experiences of Grade 3 teachers teaching in an environment of proficiency collapse.
2. Identify the strategies, adaptations, and instructional practices employed by teachers to address gaps between prescribed curriculum standards and students' actual proficiency levels.
3. Examine how teachers perceive their professional identity, roles, and sense of efficacy in the context of declining student performance.
4. Explore the challenges and coping mechanisms of Grade 3 teachers as they respond to the demands of teaching under conditions of proficiency collapse.
5. Generate insights that may contribute to the development of support systems, policies, and interventions aimed at improving both teacher well-being and student learning outcomes.

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METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design informed by Moustakas (1994). The design was selected because the inquiry sought to describe and interpret the meaning of a shared experience from the perspectives of teachers who encounter the phenomenon directly. The researcher used epoche, or bracketing, as an intentional reflexive practice, recognizing that prior professional knowledge and assumptions could influence interpretation. The analysis then proceeded through horizontalization, identification of invariant meaning units, clustering of meanings, and development of textural and structural descriptions before synthesis of the essence of the experience.

Research Participants and Sampling

The participants were 10 Grade 3 teachers from public elementary schools in the Division of Samar. Purposive sampling was used because participants needed direct and sustained experience teaching Grade 3 learners and confronting the learning conditions examined in the study. The inclusion criteria were:

(1) current or recent Grade 3 teaching experience;

(2) direct experience teaching learners with substantial literacy and/or numeracy gaps; and

(3) willingness to provide detailed reflections on instructional and emotional experiences.

Participant identities were protected through codes P1 to P10.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions about participants' teaching experience, perceptions of learner proficiency, classroom experiences, instructional adaptations, emotional responses, professional identity, definitions of success, perceived institutional support, and recommendations for stakeholders. The flexible structure allowed participants to elaborate on experiences that they considered significant while maintaining consistency across interviews.

Data Gathering Procedure

After securing the required permissions and informed consent, the researcher conducted individual in-depth interviews in private settings. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were used to document contextual observations and nonverbal cues that could assist interpretation. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without penalty. The interview materials were treated confidentially, and participant codes were used in the research records and manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature before participation, and written informed consent was obtained. Participant codes were used instead of names, research records were stored securely, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty. The manuscript reports only the information necessary to communicate the findings and avoids identifying details. The researcher also discloses the use of artificial intelligence as a supplementary tool for language refinement and organization; interpretation, coding, and substantive synthesis remained the responsibility of the researcher.

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Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen procedure within the transcendental phenomenological tradition (Moustakas, 1994). The analysis proceeded in seven steps:

1. **Epoche.** The researcher identified and set aside preconceptions as far as possible and documented reflexive observations.
2. **Horizontalization.** Significant statements were identified, giving each potentially relevant statement initial equal consideration.
3. **Invariant meaning units.** Invariant meaning units were formulated and clustered according to shared meanings.
4. **Thematic constituents.** Thematic constituents were developed from the meaning clusters.
5. **Textural description.** A textural description was constructed to describe what the participants experienced.
6. **Structural description.** A structural description was developed to describe the contextual conditions and circumstances through which the experience occurred.
7. **Synthesis.** The textural and structural descriptions were synthesized into a composite description and the essence of the phenomenon.

The five themes reported in the Results section represent the major thematic constituents of that phenomenological synthesis.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was addressed through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through participant checking of interview accounts and emerging interpretations. Transferability was supported through contextual description of the teaching setting and the phenomenon. Dependability was strengthened through documentation of the research procedures and analytic decisions. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling and bracketing. Because the researcher is an educator and school leader working within the Philippine public-school context, reflexivity was particularly important in distinguishing participants' meanings from the researcher's prior assumptions.

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RESULTS

Analysis of the interview data yielded five themes that captured the shared experience of Grade 3 teachers: (1) skills gaps in reading and numeracy; (2) perceived contributors to proficiency collapse; (3) instructional adaptation as everyday remediation; (4) emotional strain, identity shift, and resilience; and (5) external support aspirations. Table 1 summarizes the themes, their corresponding sub-themes, and representative participant statements. Each statement is identified by participant code (P1–P10) and by its page and line location in the verbatim transcript. Table 2 shows how the themes correspond to the study objectives.

Table 1. **Summary of Themes, Sub-themes, and Sample Statements**

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative statements (participant, page, lines)
Skills Gaps in the Grade 3 Classroom	Reading Skill Deficits	"...half the class is just staring at the page because they cannot read at that level... a visible wall between the curriculum and their current abilities." (P1, p. 2, ll. 32–33) "I look across the room and see some students 'pretend reading' because they don't want to admit they cannot decode the words." (P3, p. 2, ll. 47–48) "Students are pronouncing every word incorrectly... it's heartbreaking" (P5, p. 2, ll. 35–36) "I remember a specific lesson on 'Identifying the Main Idea'. I realized I couldn't teach the concept because some students were struggling just to recognize the individual words in the paragraph" (P6, p. 2, ll. 39–41)
	Numeracy Skill Deficits	"I remember trying to teach a lesson on multi-step word problems... some students didn't even start because they were struggling with basic operations." (P1, p. 2, ll. 42–43) "We find ourselves doing addition and subtraction because they lack the prerequisite knowledge for Grade 3." (P1, p. 2, ll. 43–45)
Perceived Contributors to Proficiency Collapse	Curriculum Mismatch	"It feels like there is a disconnect. The administration acknowledges the gap, but we're still on pace with a curriculum that many students aren't ready for." (P1, p. 3, ll. 64–65)
	Other Factors	"When I hear 'proficiency collapse' I imagine the classroom feels like a library in a language no one speaks." (P10, p. 1, ll. 29–30) "We're dealing with a 'proficiency collapse', not just a gap that can be fixed overnight." (P2, p. 3, ll. 80–81)
Instructional Adaptation as Everyday Remediation	Scaffolding and Differentiation	"I have moved toward 'total scaffolding'. I take the standard Grade 3 materials and rewrite them into simpler, phonetic-based scripts so that every child has a point of entry into the lesson." (P3, p. 3, ll. 78–80)

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		"I've had to 'scaffold' everything. I use a lot of small-group rotations and simplify tasks to make complex Grade 3 curriculum accessible to those at a Grade 1 level." (P1, p. 2, ll. 58–60) "I differentiate by literacy level: some kids read a passage orally, others follow along with pictures." (P6, p. 2, ll. 58–59)
	Small-Group and Peer Tutoring	"I put students in pairs and say, 'Quiz your partner,' so they can practice with each other." (P3, p. 3, l. 78) "In math, I do stations—one table works with me, another with a student tutor." (P7, p. 2, ll. 56–57) "I rotate kids through a reading game with peers so they get extra practice." (P4, p. 2, ll. 57–58)
	Tiered and Remedial Instruction	"On a typical day, I feel the gap most during 'Tier 1' instruction... I end up teaching Grade 1 and 2 content just to meet them where they are." (P1, p. 2, ll. 37–39) "We often abandon the planned Grade 3 lesson to conduct basic phonemic awareness drills." (P2, p. 2, ll. 53–54) "I run small remedial groups at recess and lunch to catch students up." (P9, p. 2, ll. 54–55)
	Emotional Support and Scaffolding	"I use emotional scaffolding: we start each day with a confidence game so they'll try new words without fear." (P5, p. 2, ll. 53–54) "I celebrate even tiny wins to motivate them (like reading a new word correctly)." (P8, p. 2, ll. 67–68) "I try to make learning fun with songs and gestures so they stay engaged." (P2, p. 2, ll. 58–59)
	Curriculum Adaptation	"I have to rewrite texts in simpler English so every child has a point of entry into the lesson." (P1, p. 2, ll. 60–61) "Instead of covering all objectives, I choose one concept and sink time into it." (P4, p. 2, ll. 58–59)
Emotional Strain, Identity Shift, and Resilience	Stress and Overwhelm	"It felt incredibly heavy—a mix of defeat and urgency." (P1, p. 2, l. 45) "I would choose the image of a rowboat in a storm... I'm rowing as fast as I can, but the waves just keep coming." (P1, p. 3, ll. 73–74)
	Identity Shift	"My morale has taken a hit. I used to see myself as an educator... now I see myself as more of a 'damage control' worker just trying to keep them from falling further behind." (P1, p. 2, ll. 49–51)

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		"My professional identity has shifted from being an 'educator' to being a 'remediator.'" (P6, p. 2, ll. 45–56)
	Resilience and Commitment	"I just keep going... we celebrate any progress, no matter how small." (P1, p. 3, ll. 70–71) "Even when I'm exhausted, I remind myself that one kid understanding something makes it worth it." (P3, p. 3, ll. 95–96)
	Emotional Labor	"I remind each child daily: 'You are smart, you can do this,' even when I'm not sure." (P8, p. 2, ll. 68–69)
External Support Aspirations	Policy Misconceptions	"I wish policymakers understood that a 'proficiency collapse' isn't just a small dip—it's a hole in a child's foundation." (P2, p. 3, ll. 79–80) "They keep adding works and requirements, not realizing we're missing basic skills." (P6, p. 3, ll. 76–77)
	Public and Parental Awareness	"I wish the public understood that a 'literacy gap' isn't a language issue, it's a systemic one requiring a shift in support." (P3, p. 4, ll. 111–112) "I wish parents knew that coming to Grade 3 isn't fun when you're reading at Kindergarten level." (P9, p. 3, ll. 72–73) "When I hear people blame teachers for low scores, I think they haven't been in these shoes." (P7, p. 3, ll. 77–78)
	Resource and Support Needs	"I wish they understood that what we need are dedicated reading specialists, not just more rigorous testing." (P6, p. 3, ll. 80–81) "More aides and phonics resources—that's what would help, not a new curriculum." (P2, p. 3, ll. 82–83) "If just two or more volunteers came to teach kids to read, we'd see huge gains." (P4, p. 3, ll. 80–81)

Note. P1–P10 = participant codes; p. = page and l./ll. = line(s) of the verbatim interview transcript.

Table 2. **Correspondence Between Study Objectives and Themes**

Study objective	Corresponding theme(s)
1. Describe the daily pedagogical and emotional experiences of Grade 3 teachers.	Theme 1 (skills gaps in the classroom); Theme 3 (instructional adaptation as everyday remediation); Theme 4 (emotional strain, identity shift, and resilience)

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Study objective	Corresponding theme(s)
2. Identify the strategies, adaptations, and instructional practices used to address gaps between curriculum standards and actual proficiency.	Theme 3 (scaffolding, differentiation, peer tutoring, remedial instruction, emotional support, curriculum adaptation); Theme 2 (curriculum mismatch as the condition being addressed)
3. Examine how teachers perceive their professional identity, roles, and sense of efficacy.	Theme 4 (identity shift from 'educator' to 'remediator'; resilience and commitment)
4. Explore the challenges and coping mechanisms of teachers.	Challenges: Theme 1 and Theme 2. Coping: Theme 3 (adaptation) and Theme 4 (resilience and commitment)
5. Generate insights for support systems, policies, and interventions.	Theme 5 (external support aspirations), together with the Recommendations

Theme 1: Skills Gaps in the Grade 3 Classroom

Participants consistently described a classroom reality in which some learners had not yet acquired the foundational literacy and numeracy skills needed for Grade 3 work. The problem was particularly visible when teachers introduced grade-level texts, comprehension tasks, or multistep mathematics.

Reading skill deficits

Four participants described reading difficulties that were evident in everyday lessons. P1 characterized the situation as one in which "half the class is just staring at the page because they cannot read at that level... a visible wall between the curriculum and their current abilities." P3 described learners who concealed their difficulty: "I look across the room and see some students 'pretend reading' because they don't want to admit they cannot decode the words." P5 reported that "students are pronouncing every word incorrectly... it's heartbreaking," indicating that the difficulty was emotionally affecting for the teacher as well as instructionally limiting. P6 recalled that a lesson on identifying the main idea could not proceed as planned: "I realized I couldn't teach the concept because some students were struggling just to recognize the individual words in the paragraph."

Numeracy skill deficits

In mathematics, P1 recalled, "I remember trying to teach a lesson on multi-step word problems... some students didn't even start because they were struggling with basic operations." The same participant added, "We find ourselves doing addition and subtraction because they lack the prerequisite knowledge for Grade 3."

Across both domains, grade-level activities became dependent on the reconstruction of earlier skills. The experience therefore affected both the content teachers could address and the pace at which they could proceed.

Theme 2: Perceived Contributors to Proficiency Collapse

Participants attributed the classroom difficulty to a combination of curriculum–readiness mismatch and broader systemic conditions. Their narratives emphasized the relationship among prerequisite knowledge, curriculum

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expectations, available time, instructional resources, and support structures, and they located the problem beyond individual learner effort.

Curriculum mismatch

P1 described a "disconnect" in which administrators recognized the learning gap but teachers were still expected to maintain the curriculum pace: "The administration acknowledges the gap, but we're still on pace with a curriculum that many students aren't ready for."

Other factors

Other participants conveyed the severity and persistence of the condition rather than a single cause. P2 characterized it as "not just a gap that can be fixed overnight," while P10 used the image of a classroom that felt "like a library in a language no one speaks." Participants' framing of the problem as systemic is further evident in Theme 5, where P3 described the literacy gap as "a systemic one requiring a shift in support."

Theme 3: Instructional Adaptation as Everyday Remediation

Participants responded to learning gaps by modifying instruction extensively. The adaptations took five interrelated forms: scaffolding and differentiation, small-group and peer tutoring, tiered and remedial instruction, emotional support, and curriculum adaptation.

Scaffolding and differentiation

P3 described a move toward "total scaffolding": "I take the standard Grade 3 materials and rewrite them into simpler, phonetic-based scripts so that every child has a point of entry into the lesson." P1 similarly reported, "I've had to 'scaffold' everything," using small-group rotations and simplified tasks so that learners performing at a Grade 1 level could access the Grade 3 curriculum. P6 differentiated by literacy level: "some kids read a passage orally, others follow along with pictures."

Small-group and peer tutoring

Peer-supported practice was used to extend teachers' reach. P3 paired students ("Quiz your partner"), P7 organized mathematics stations in which "one table works with me, another with a student tutor," and P4 rotated learners "through a reading game with peers so they get extra practice."

Tiered and remedial instruction

Remediation frequently displaced planned grade-level instruction. P1 felt the gap most during Tier 1 instruction and ended up "teaching Grade 1 and 2 content just to meet them where they are." P2 reported that "we often abandon the planned Grade 3 lesson to conduct basic phonemic awareness drills," and P9 ran "small remedial groups at recess and lunch to catch students up."

Emotional support and scaffolding

Emotional scaffolding was another component of adaptation. P5 started each day with "a confidence game so they'll try new words without fear," P8 celebrated "even tiny wins to motivate them," and P2 used "songs and gestures so they stay engaged."

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Curriculum adaptation

Teachers also reshaped the curriculum itself. P1 explained, "I have to rewrite texts in simpler English so every child has a point of entry into the lesson," while P4 narrowed coverage: "Instead of covering all objectives, I choose one concept and sink time into it."

Theme 4: Emotional Strain, Identity Shift, and Resilience

The experience was emotionally demanding, but the narratives contained evidence of strain, changing professional identity, and resilience at the same time.

Stress and overwhelm

P1 described the experience as "incredibly heavy—a mix of defeat and urgency" and compared teaching to being in "a rowboat in a storm... I'm rowing as fast as I can, but the waves just keep coming."

Identity shift

Participants described a change in how they saw their role. P1 said, "My morale has taken a hit. I used to see myself as an educator... now I see myself as more of a 'damage control' worker just trying to keep them from falling further behind." P6 similarly reported that "my professional identity has shifted from being an 'educator' to being a 'remediator.'"

Resilience and commitment

Alongside strain, participants expressed persistence. P1 said, "I just keep going... we celebrate any progress, no matter how small," and P3 remarked, "Even when I'm exhausted, I remind myself that one kid understanding something makes it worth it." Participants thus described finding meaning in small learning gains and in encouraging learners even when progress was slow.

Emotional labor

Teachers also carried the emotional work of sustaining learners' confidence. P8 reported, "I remind each child daily: 'You are smart, you can do this,' even when I'm not sure." Taken together, the accounts show that the emotional experience was not reducible to stress: teachers simultaneously experienced frustration, responsibility, hope, care, and persistence.

Theme 5: External Support Aspirations

Participants expressed a strong desire for support beyond individual teacher effort. They wanted policymakers, parents, and the wider public to understand the depth of foundational learning difficulties, and they called for resources and personnel that could support classroom remediation.

Policy misconceptions

P2 wished that "policymakers understood that a 'proficiency collapse' isn't just a small dip—it's a hole in a child's foundation." P6 observed that policymakers "keep adding works and requirements, not realizing we're missing basic skills."

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Public and parental awareness

P3 wished that the public understood that a literacy gap "isn't a language issue, it's a systemic one requiring a shift in support." P9 wished that parents knew that "coming to Grade 3 isn't fun when you're reading at Kindergarten level," and P7 felt that people who blame teachers for low scores "haven't been in these shoes."

Resource and support needs

Participants identified concrete needs. P6 stated that teachers need "dedicated reading specialists, not just more rigorous testing." P2 identified "more aides and phonics resources" as what would help, "not a new curriculum," while P4 suggested that volunteer support for learners who need intensive reading practice would produce "huge gains."

Composite Description and Essence of the Experience

Textural description (what was experienced). Teachers encountered learners who could not decode grade-level text or perform basic operations, abandoned or reshaped planned lessons, and experienced the work as heavy, urgent, and at times defeating. They described themselves increasingly as remediators, yet they continued to celebrate small gains and to reassure learners.

Structural description (conditions through which it was experienced). The experience unfolded within a curriculum pace that teachers perceived as misaligned with learner readiness, within limited time that pushed remediation into recess and lunch periods, with limited access to specialists, aides, and phonics resources, and with limited public and policy understanding of the depth of the gap.

Essence. Across the five themes, the phenomenological synthesis points to an experience of *resilient remediation*. Teachers encountered learners whose foundational skills did not consistently match Grade 3 expectations; they responded by reconstructing lessons around immediate needs, carrying emotional and professional demands, and continuing to seek small signs of progress. The essence is therefore not simply that teachers experienced learning gaps, but that they repeatedly reoriented their professional practice to make learning possible under conditions they perceived as persistently misaligned with learner readiness.

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DISCUSSION

This study explored how Grade 3 teachers in the Division of Samar experience and respond to a severe and persistent mismatch between expected curriculum competencies and learners' demonstrated foundational skills. The five themes show that the experience was simultaneously pedagogical, emotional, professional, and structural, and the essence of resilient remediation draws these dimensions together. This section interprets the themes in relation to the study objectives and the literature.

Foundational Gaps as a Disruption of the Instructional Sequence

The accounts show that teachers experienced the proficiency problem not simply as low test performance but as a disruption in the instructional sequence. Grade-level activities became dependent on the reconstruction of earlier skills, so the experience affected both the content teachers could address and the pace at which they could proceed. These accounts are consistent with the broader national evidence that many Grade 3 learners continue to struggle with foundational literacy and numeracy competencies (EDCOM 2, 2026). Because the present findings come from ten teachers, they do not estimate how widespread the gaps are. Rather, they show what national proficiency statistics can mean at the level of classroom practice: the "pretend reading" described by P3 and the stalled multistep problems described by P1 are the instructional counterpart of low proficiency rates.

Curriculum–Readiness Mismatch and the Systemic Framing of the Problem

Curriculum alignment requires coherence among standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment; when these elements are experienced as disconnected from learner readiness, teachers may compensate through classroom-level adaptations. Participants' accounts suggest that the mismatch they described concerned pace and expectations more than the content of the curriculum itself. P1 described remaining on pace with a curriculum for which many learners were not ready, whereas P2 and P6 emphasized that what would help was additional aides, phonics resources, and reading specialists rather than a new curriculum or more rigorous testing.

The significance of these accounts also lies in how teachers located the problem beyond individual learner effort. Participants used the term "proficiency collapse" to convey severity (P2, P10), and P3 explicitly described the literacy gap as systemic. The national learning-recovery response likewise reflects recognition that foundational competencies require targeted intervention rather than reliance on grade-level progression alone (Philippine Information Agency, 2025).

Adaptation as Differentiated Instruction and Professional Labor

The practices participants described reflect differentiated instruction, which emphasizes responsive adjustment to learner readiness and needs (Tomlinson, 2017). Teachers adjusted content by rewriting and simplifying texts, process through small-group rotations, stations, and peer tutoring, and the learning environment through confidence games, songs, and gestures. However, the participants' accounts also reveal the cost of adaptation. Rewriting materials, reteaching earlier competencies, conducting remedial sessions, and providing emotional encouragement require additional time and energy. Running remedial groups during recess and lunch (P9) and concentrating on one concept at the expense of covering all objectives (P4) illustrate that adaptation drew on teachers' personal time and narrowed curriculum coverage. Adaptation therefore functioned as both a pedagogical response and a form of professional labor through which teachers attempted to maintain access to learning.

Emotional Labor and the Renegotiation of Professional Identity

The pattern of strain, identity shift, and resilience is consistent with research showing that teachers' professional identities are shaped through emotional and relational experiences of teaching (O'Connor, 2008). In the present study,

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the repeated need to remediate foundational skills altered how teachers described their role: P1 described becoming a "damage control" worker and P6 a "remediator." Teachers nevertheless remained committed to teaching, and their work expanded to include remediation, confidence building, and protection against further learning loss. The coexistence of exhaustion with meaning drawn from small gains (P3) suggests that commitment and strain were intertwined rather than opposed.

Support Aspirations and Shared Responsibility

Participants did not view classroom adaptation as sufficient to address a persistent system-level problem. Their recommendations focused on human resources, foundational literacy materials, targeted remediation, and shared responsibility among schools, families, communities, and education authorities, and they questioned policy responses that add requirements or testing without addressing missing basic skills. This perspective complements national efforts to strengthen literacy recovery and foundational learning (EDCOM 2, 2026; Philippine Information Agency, 2025), and it suggests that the sustainability of teachers' adaptive responses may depend on support that does not rest on individual commitment alone.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered. First, the study involved ten teachers from public elementary schools in one division; as in other phenomenological research, the findings are intended to describe the essence of a shared experience in depth and are not statistically generalizable, so transferability rests on the reader's judgment of the similarity between contexts. Second, the findings are based on participants' self-reported accounts from interviews and were not triangulated with classroom observation or learner assessment data; national assessment figures were used to contextualize, not to verify, participants' perceptions. Third, because the researcher is an educator and school leader in the same public-school context, interpretation may have been influenced by prior assumptions despite the use of bracketing, reflexive journaling, and participant checking. Finally, "proficiency collapse" is a study-specific descriptor rather than an established diagnostic category, and findings should be read as teachers' lived experiences of learning gaps.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of the Grade 3 teachers in this study reveal a complex interaction among foundational learning gaps, curriculum expectations, instructional adaptation, emotional labor, professional identity, and institutional support. Participants experienced proficiency collapse as a classroom-level condition in which some learners lacked the prerequisite literacy and numeracy skills needed to engage fully with Grade 3 competencies. Consequently, teachers frequently moved backward in the instructional sequence to rebuild foundational skills.

The teachers' responses were adaptive and resourceful. They used scaffolding, differentiation, peer support, remedial instruction, emotional encouragement, and curriculum modification to create points of entry for learners. These practices enabled continued participation but also increased teachers' workload and emotional demands. Their accounts further showed that professional identity was affected as teachers increasingly understood themselves as remediators as well as classroom instructors.

The study's central phenomenological insight is resilient remediation: teachers continually reconstruct their teaching around learners' immediate needs while sustaining commitment to their students despite persistent constraints. Addressing the underlying condition therefore requires support that extends beyond individual teacher effort and includes targeted foundational-skills interventions, appropriate instructional resources, professional support, and stronger alignment between curriculum expectations and learner readiness.

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Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered to the stakeholders concerned.

For Grade 3 teachers. Teachers may continue using differentiated, scaffolded, and remedial approaches that respond to learners' demonstrated readiness. These adaptations should be supported by simple learner profiles or diagnostic records so instruction can target specific foundational reading and numeracy competencies rather than relying only on whole-class adjustments. Teachers may also document successful remediation practices for sharing through grade-level learning action cells.

For school heads and instructional leaders. School heads may establish or strengthen school-based systems for early identification and monitoring of foundational literacy and numeracy gaps. Regular collaborative discussions among teachers, school leaders, and support personnel can be used to review learner progress, identify priority competencies, and coordinate interventions. Administrative planning should also consider the additional workload created by repeated remediation, material adaptation, and small-group instruction.

For schools and teachers. Schools may develop structured foundational-skills intervention periods within the regular learning program. These interventions can prioritize essential reading and numeracy competencies before learners are expected to engage fully with more complex Grade 3 content. Progress-monitoring records should guide decisions about whether learners are ready to transition from remediation toward grade-level tasks.

For the Department of Education and education policymakers. Education authorities may strengthen alignment among curriculum expectations, learner readiness, assessment information, and learning-recovery initiatives. Participants' accounts indicate a need for practical resources and human support when foundational gaps are substantial. Targeted literacy and numeracy specialists, intervention materials, teacher professional development, and appropriate remediation time may complement existing learning-recovery efforts.

For parents and community stakeholders. Schools may strengthen communication with parents and community partners about the importance of foundational reading and numeracy skills and the time required to develop them. Parent and community participation can include reading practice at home, support for regular attendance, participation in school literacy activities, and volunteer assistance where appropriate and permitted by school policies.

For teacher professional development. Professional learning programs may focus on diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, foundational reading practices, numeracy remediation, small-group instruction, and strategies for supporting learners' confidence and engagement. Professional development may also address teachers' emotional and workload demands associated with sustained remediation.

For future researchers. Future studies may examine the effectiveness of specific foundational literacy and numeracy interventions, compare teacher experiences across grade levels or school contexts, and investigate how learning gaps change over time. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies may complement the present phenomenological findings by examining relationships among intervention participation, learner attendance, foundational skills, and subsequent achievement.

For subsequent phenomenological inquiry. Future qualitative researchers may explore the experiences of learners, parents, reading specialists, and school leaders to provide a more comprehensive account of the conditions surrounding foundational learning gaps. Such studies may help triangulate teachers' experiences and identify areas where school-level and system-level support can be strengthened.

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