



Obtaining a Master's Degree in Career Advancement for Early Childhood Teachers: Motivations and Obstacles

Clyde Alvia

Tubod College, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

E-mail: clyde.alvia@sccpag.edu.ph, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9800-8602>

Angel Mae Maceda

Tubod College, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

E-mail: angelmaceda580@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3299-8842>

Nursima Alian

Tubod College, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

E-mail: aliannursima8@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4105-158X>

Nor-janna Usman

Tubod College, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

E-mail: Jannau372@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0639-6970>

Jean Collin Malinis

Tubod College, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

E-mail: jeancollinmalinis@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4478-7317>

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Advanced graduate education is increasingly important for strengthening teacher competence, professional identity, and instructional quality in early childhood education. However, limited qualitative evidence exists on the lived experiences of early childhood educators in regional Philippine colleges. This study examined the motivations, challenges, and professional reflections of early childhood educators at Tubod College, Lanao del Norte, who were pursuing or had completed a master's degree.

Materials and Methods: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected early childhood educators enrolled in or recently graduated from the master's program at Tubod College. The narratives were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring motivations, barriers, and perceived professional transformations related to graduate study.

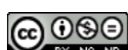
Results: Findings showed that most participants were motivated by career advancement, professional competence, and lifelong learning. Ninety percent of participants reported that graduate study was driven by career growth and the desire to strengthen pedagogical skills. However, they also experienced substantial challenges, particularly balancing full-time teaching responsibilities with graduate coursework, financial pressures, and limited institutional support. Despite these obstacles, participants reported improved teaching confidence, stronger classroom management, deeper understanding of children's developmental needs, and greater use of child-centered and research-based practices.

Conclusion: Pursuing a master's degree contributes meaningfully to the professional growth of early childhood educators and improves the quality of classroom practice. Graduate education strengthens teachers' confidence, pedagogical leadership, and reflective capacity; however, its benefits require institutional support to be sustained. Flexible schedules, mentoring, financial assistance, and structured return-service or incentive policies are recommended to help educators complete graduate studies and apply their learning effectively in early childhood education settings.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Career Advancement, Tubod College, Teacher Motivations, Phenomenological Study.

Introduction

Problem Statement: Professional development is a global necessity, but in the context of Lanao del Norte, the path to advanced credentials is fraught with localized obstacles. This study is critical because there is a scarcity of qualitative data focusing specifically on regional colleges in the Philippines.





Current local policy shifts increasingly demand higher credentials for early childhood educators, yet the structural support to meet these demands is often missing.

Teachers' motivations for pursuing a master's degree in early childhood education are shaped by a combination of personal aspirations and professional goals. Prior studies indicate that educators are driven by career advancement, the desire to enhance professional competence, and a commitment to lifelong learning. External influences such as family encouragement and institutional support also play a significant role in motivating teachers to pursue postgraduate education. These internal and external motivations reflect educators' strong dedication to the field of early childhood education and highlight the need for supportive policies, including scholarships, flexible teaching schedules, and structured mentoring programs to sustain teachers' professional growth (Valle-Flórez et al., 2024; Rahmawati & Al-Rashid, 2025; AlHussaini et al., 2024).

Despite strong motivation, teachers pursuing a master's degree encounter significant challenges. Research has shown that balancing work responsibilities with academic demands, managing financial pressures, coping with stress, and experiencing inconsistent institutional support can negatively affect teachers' well-being and academic performance. These findings emphasize the importance of institutional interventions such as financial assistance, counseling services, academic mentoring, and flexible scheduling to support teachers throughout their graduate studies (Wu et al, 2026; Merino, 2025).

Graduate education has also been found to influence classroom practices positively. Teachers who complete master's programs demonstrate stronger application of research-based teaching strategies, child-centered approaches, developmental theories, and improved assessment practices. Studies indicate that advanced education fosters reflective teaching and enhances instructional quality, underscoring the value of continuous research-based professional development and opportunities for reflection within school settings (Cadime et al., 2025).

Furthermore, engagement in master's programs contributes to meaningful shifts in teachers' beliefs and perspectives about teaching and learning. Traditional, teacher-centered views are often replaced by child-centered, play-based, and developmentally appropriate practices as educators engage with contemporary theories and reflective learning experiences. These transformations suggest the importance of integrating theory-driven, experiential, and reflective components into professional development initiatives (Benemerito, 2025).

Finally, teachers who completed their master's degrees shared some real significance changes, including stronger self-confidence, leadership readiness, deeper learner understanding, and enhanced professional identity. The study shows that graduate education boosts both personal growth and professional skills. With that in mind, schools should step up by offering more leadership opportunities, mentoring programs, and clear paths for advancement to these highly trained teachers Merino, 2025; Rahmawati & Al-Rashid, 2025).

Objectives

To investigate the motivations for pursuing graduate study: "What pushes teachers into grad school? Look at why those teaching young kids choose to chase a master's. Some do it for growth, others feel pulled by outside pressure. Each path carries its own weight. Not every reason is obvious."

To identify the multifaceted barriers and stressors encountered: "Barriers pop up - time, money, work demands. Support systems can bend under stress. Hidden hurdles live in schedules, finances, and even self-doubt. Obstacles differ widely between individuals. Personal limits mix with structural gaps."

To explore the impact on routines and the requirements for persistence: "Still, many push forward. The journey reshapes routines. Staying in the game takes more than intent."

Literature Review

The heightened focus on professional development and advanced education in Early Childhood Education (ECE) signifies the growing acknowledgment of teachers' roles in fostering children's academic, social, and emotional growth. Recent studies indicate that educators who pursue ongoing





professional development and advanced degrees are more adept at applying effective teaching methods, cultivating inclusive classrooms, and promoting child-centered learning environments. This study consolidates current literature into four principal themes: (1) educator beliefs and self-efficacy, (2) professional development and educational achievement, (3) teacher well-being and inclusive culture, and (4) pedagogical leadership and advanced qualifications. These themes establish the conceptual basis for comprehending the motivations, obstacles, and professional transformations encountered by educators undertaking advanced graduate studies in Early Childhood Education.

Teacher Beliefs and Self-Efficacy

Educators' pedagogical convictions significantly influence classroom dynamics and learning settings. Research indicates that instructors' views toward teaching and learning directly affect emotional support, classroom structure, and instructional quality. Tilbe and Xiaosong (2024) asserted that educators with robust pedagogical convictions are more inclined to establish nurturing and effectively organized classroom settings that beneficially impact children's development.

Teacher self-efficacy is also linked to the quality of relationships between teachers and children. Educators possessing heightened confidence in their educational competencies exhibit more adaptive and consistent classroom methodologies. Advanced education and professional development enhance instructional competence and reflective teaching practices, which are vital elements of high-quality early childhood instruction (Wu et al, 2026). The findings indicate that postgraduate education bolsters teachers' confidence, allowing for more effective implementation of research-based instructional practices.

Professional Development and Educational Level

Professional development and higher educational qualifications substantially impact teacher efficacy and instructional quality. Research indicates that educators with advanced academic credentials exhibit enhanced classroom engagement and increased developmental insight. Yang et al. (2024) discovered that educators with advanced educational training demonstrated more successful interactions with children in classroom environments, especially in fostering cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Reflective practice has become an essential element of teacher development. Han et al. (2020) asserted that reflective teaching encourages educators to consistently assess and enhance their instructional methodologies. Nevertheless, numerous educational institutions continue to lack organized frameworks that reliably facilitate teacher reflection and professional development. Advanced graduate programs, including master's degrees, offer teachers chances for reflective learning, research-based practice, and professional inquiry, thereby enhancing their instructional competence and educational leadership.

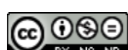
Teacher Well-Being and Inclusive Culture

The well-being of educators and the culture of the workplace are critical determinants of professional efficacy and the quality of education. Recent research has increasingly examined the emotional experiences of early childhood educators and the correlation between workplace support and teacher efficacy. Li et al. (2024) underscored the increasing focus on teacher well-being and its influence on professional efficacy, stressing the significance of nurturing educational environments.

Granados et al. (2023) similarly discovered that inclusive and collaborative workplace environments promote professional development and cultivate healthy relationships among educators. Encouraging educational settings foster introspective practice, collaborative engagement among peers, and ongoing professional advancement. Master 's-level training enhances these results by prompting educators to critically analyze their teaching methods and participate in reflective inquiry. Such encounters augment personal development and pedagogical efficacy.

Pedagogical Leadership and Advanced Credentials

Higher educational qualifications are increasingly linked to pedagogical leadership in early childhood education. Educators who engage in graduate studies frequently have expanded professional responsibilities beyond classroom teaching, such as curriculum creation, mentoring, and instructional leadership. Fonsén et al. (2023) indicated that educators with higher qualifications view themselves as pedagogical leaders who may mentor peers and enhance school reform efforts.



Notwithstanding these contributions, educational organizations may fail to acknowledge instructional leadership as commensurate with administrative leadership. As a result, educators possessing advanced qualifications may encounter restricted institutional acknowledgment despite their ability to foster innovation and enhance instruction. Postgraduate education continues to enhance educators' professional identity, leadership skills, and dedication to evidence-based practice.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The present literature collectively indicates that professional development and advanced education enhance classroom quality, teacher confidence, instructional efficacy, and child-centered pedagogy. Research further demonstrates that teacher well-being, reflective practice, and institutional support substantially enhance professional development and educational quality.

Nevertheless, scant research has directly examined the lived experiences of educators doing or finalizing a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education, especially within regional settings in the Philippines. Current research has predominantly concentrated on instructional results and professional competencies, with insufficient emphasis on how educators manage academic obligations, professional responsibilities, and personal problems while pursuing graduate study. Moreover, there is a lack of qualitative research concerning the impact of advanced education on the professional identities, classroom practices, and perspectives of teaching and learning among educators.

This study aims to investigate the motivations, challenges, and perceived professional transformations of early childhood educators undertaking advanced graduate education.

Conceptual Framework

Professional development in education is like a path that people follow. This path has three parts: what you put into it, what you do, and what you get out of it. When you first start, you think about what makes you want to do this. You want to learn and grow. You get help from the people around you and the place where you work. They support you. Help you move up in your career. Then you get to the part where you are actually doing it. This is the part. You have to deal with not having a lot of money and trying to balance work and study at the same time. You are also taking classes to get a better degree, and you are thinking about how you can teach people better. You are taking action. Trying to become a better teacher. The professional development in education is a journey, with these parts: the input of development, the process of professional development, and the output of professional development. Finally, the Output signifies the transformation resulting from this journey, manifesting as improved classroom competence and a shift toward teaching methods that are research-based and child-centered.

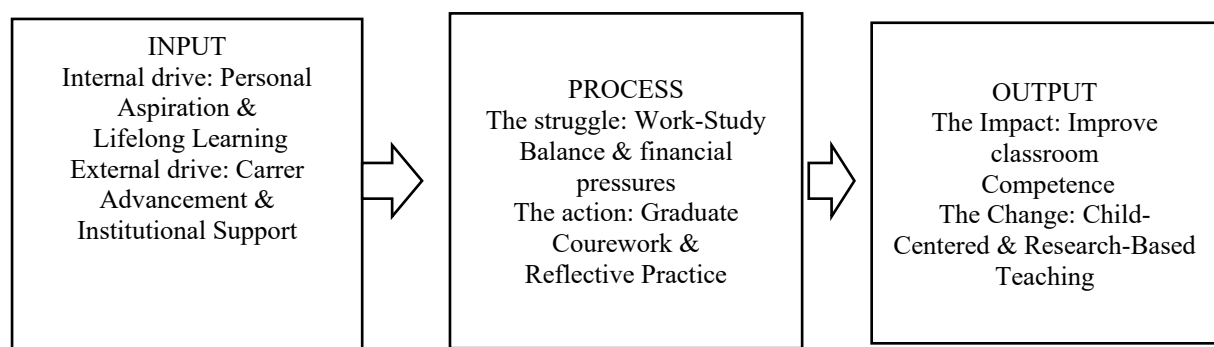


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Methodology This chapter is about the research procedures utilized in this study, including the research design, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection protocols, and analytical framework. The methodology was developed to explore the lived experiences of teachers who have graduated from a Master's in Early Childhood Education, specifically focusing on their motivations, challenges, and professional growth.



Research Design. The study looked at what it's like for teachers to get a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education. The people doing the study chose to use a method called phenomenology because it helps us understand what people think and feel about what happens to them. This way, the study could find out why teachers wanted to get a Master's degree, what problems they had, how they used what they learned in the classroom, and if getting the degree changed the way they teach. The study made sure to listen to what the teachers thought and felt, so their true thoughts were the most important part of the research. The study was about the teachers and their experiences getting a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education.

Research Environment. The study was conducted at Tubod College in Tubod, Lanao del Norte. This institution was selected due to its established graduate programs in Early Childhood Education, which emphasize reflective practice and continuous professional development.

Research Respondents. The teachers who were chosen to participate in this had to have been part of the Master's program. To be eligible, the teachers had to meet these requirements:

- * They had to be enrolled in the Master's in Early Childhood Education program or have already completed it

- * They had to have been teaching children for at least one year. The teachers were picked because they were willing to talk about what they had learned from their jobs. The Master's program was very important to this study. The teachers came from different backgrounds, which meant they had a lot of different ideas and experiences to share about the challenges they faced and what they learned during their time in the Master's program. The Master's program was a part of this study, and the teachers' experiences with the Master's program were very valuable.

Research Instrument. The researchers made a list of questions to ask teachers. This list ended with questions that were related to what the researchers wanted to find out. They wanted to know what motivates teachers, what challenges they face, how they use what they have learned, and if their ideas about teaching have changed. The list of questions was divided into five parts. Each part had some guiding questions to help teachers give answers. The researchers made sure the questions were clear and relevant to what they were trying to find out. They wanted to get a lot of information from the teachers. The teachers' answers would help the researchers understand things better.

Data Gathering. Procedure Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted both in person and via digital platforms, depending on participant availability. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the sessions. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to member-checking—a process where participants review their transcripts to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data. Data Analysis. The data was looked at carefully. All the transcripts were gone one by one, and the important things people said were found and grouped. These groups were then organized into categories that matched what the study was trying to find out about: what motivated people, what challenges they faced, how they used what they learned, how their thoughts and feelings changed over time, and how they grew as individuals and in their jobs. This way of doing things made sure that the experiences of the people in the study were shown in a detailed and accurate way. The study looked at motivations. It also looked at challenges and the application of knowledge, evolving beliefs, and personal and professional growth.

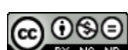
Ethical Considerations. This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, all data were anonymized, and digital recordings were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the respondents' experiences and reflections while pursuing a master's degree in early childhood education.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Profile	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Position/Rank	Master 1	9	90.0





Profile	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Years in Service	Master's in ECE	1	10.0
	2 years	1	10.0
	4 years	8	80.0
	8 years	1	10.0
Total		10	100.0

Ten teachers, nearly all at Master I - nine out of ten. Most have been teaching for four years, so they are settled into the rhythm, not new but not veterans either (Table 1). Graduate school feels like the next step when you're here, building on what's already working.

Table 2: Scoring Procedure and Interpretation

Rating	Scoring Scale	Qualitative Description	Qualitative Interpretation
5	4.20-5.00	Strongly Agree	Very High
4	3.40-4.19	Agree	High
3	2.60-3.39	Neutral	Moderate
2	1.80-2.59	Disagree	Low
1	1.00-1.79	Strongly Disagree	Very Low

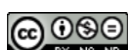
Table 3: Teachers' Motivation for Pursuing Master's Degree

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Qualitative Interpretation
Career Advancement	3.00	5.00	4.50	0.52	Very High
Professional Competence	3.00	5.00	4.20	0.61	Very High
External Influences/Support	2.00	5.00	3.85	0.74	High
Total Motivation	2.66	5.00	4.18	0.62	High

What stands out most is how much career growth matters to teachers - scoring 4.50 on average (Table 3). Close behind comes building stronger skills in their field, rated at 4.20, showing deep commitment. Taken together, these scores fall into the highest range of motivation levels. Studies back this up, revealing that many educators aim for advanced degrees to meet their own ambitions. Support from loved ones does play a role, evident in the 3.85 rating it received. Yet something deeper runs stronger - the urge to keep learning throughout life.

Table 4: Extent of Challenges Encountered in Graduate Studies

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Qualitative Interpretation
Work-Life Balance	2.00	5.00	4.10	0.65	High
Financial Pressures	2.00	5.00	3.75	0.82	High
Lack of Institutional	1.00	1.00	2.90	0.70	Moderate
Total Challenges	1.66	4.66	3.58	0.72	High





One big thing stands out when people try hard but still struggle. Juggling job and study hits hardest - scored 4.10 on average (Table 4). Money worries come next, rated at 3.75. When school duties pile up alongside teaching work, stress follows - that matches what past studies found. Schools do offer some help, though - not zero, not great. Average support lands at 2.90. Guidance exists, yet better coaching plus looser timetables could change much.

Table 5: Impact of Graduate Education on Professional Growth

Variable	Mean	Qualitative Interpretation	Remarks
Application of Research-based Strategies	4.40	Very High	Significant
Shift to Child-Centered Perspectives	4.25	Very High	Significant
Leadership Readiness and Identity	4.60	Very High	Significant
Overall Professional Impact	4.42	Very High	Significant

A fresh perspective often follows earning a master's degree when teaching young children. Most noticeable? Growth in leadership mindset and personal role clarity - rated at 4.60 on average (Table 5). Learning through coursework pushed many educators away from old-school, instructor-led methods. Instead, they leaned into playful, student-driven approaches - scoring 4.25 in reports. Finishing advanced study built inner strength. Teachers then used proven techniques with greater ease inside preschool classrooms.

Motivations for Pursuing a master's degree in early childhood education

The participant pursued a master's degree primarily to improve professional knowledge and teaching practice. The participant stated: "I pursued my master's degree because I wanted to deepen my knowledge and improve my teaching practice." ("Nagkuha ko og master's degree kay gusto nako mas mapalalom akong kahibalo ug mapaayo akong pagtudlo.") This reflects strong intrinsic motivation focused on professional growth, particularly in understanding child development and applying research-based teaching strategies.

Challenges Encountered While Pursuing the Master's Program

Time management emerged as the most significant challenge. The participant shared: "I struggled with balancing work, studies, and personal responsibilities." ("Lisod kaayo nako i-balanse ang trabaho, pagtuon, ug personal nga responsibilidad.") Balancing academic deadlines alongside teaching duties added to this difficulty, highlighting the demanding nature of graduate studies while working full-time.

Application of Master's Program Learnings in Classroom Practice

The participants reported noticeable improvements in classroom practice after applying learnings from the master's program. According to the participants, "My interactions with children became more intentional, responsive, and supportive." ("Mas tinuyo, mas matinabangon, ug mas responsive ang akong pakig-uban sa mga bata.") These changes strengthened teacher-child relationships and enhanced learning experiences for young children.

Changes in Teachers' Beliefs About Teaching and Learning

The participant experienced a shift in teaching beliefs, particularly recognizing the importance of play in learning: "I now view play as a core foundation of learning." ("Karon, tan-aw nako nga importante gyud ang pagdula sa pagkat-on sa mga bata.") This indicates a move toward a more child-centered and play-based teaching approach.





Personal and Professional Growth After Completing the master's degree

The participant reported both personal and professional growth. They shared: "I developed a deeper understanding of children's needs and behaviors." "With this deeper insight, I was able to manage the classroom more effectively." These findings indicate enhanced awareness of child development, improved classroom management, and the creation of a more supportive learning environment.

Discussion

The results of this study align with current literature highlighting the crucial impact of advanced education on improving teachers' professional competence, instructional effectiveness, and personal development. The respondents' robust motivation to obtain a master's degree signifies a dedication to lifelong learning, professional development, and enhanced pedagogical methods. This data corroborates Valle-Flórez et al. (2024), who indicated that early childhood educators engage in advanced studies to augment pedagogical expertise, refine instructional decision-making, and bolster professional confidence. Cadime et al. (2025) underscored that ongoing professional development enhances teaching efficacy, especially in literacy instruction, classroom engagement, and the application of evidence-based teaching practices. These studies indicate that graduate education is a crucial avenue for educators aiming to enhance their professional identity and instructional proficiency.

The results indicated that time management and the balance between employment and study continue to pose significant obstacles for educators doing graduate studies. Participants indicated challenges in reconciling academic demands, teaching duties, and personal commitments. This discovery corresponds with Rahmawati and Al-Rashid (2025), who observed that educators often encounter time limitations and workload challenges during professional development activities. Similarly, Wu et al. (2026) emphasized that instructors participating in advanced professional training frequently encounter difficulties in balancing academic objectives with their classroom duties. This study demonstrates that engaging in higher education while fulfilling full-time teaching duties might induce emotional, physical, and professional stress. These findings highlight the necessity for educational institutions to offer adaptable learning frameworks, mentorship initiatives, and institutional support mechanisms that assist instructors in managing conflicting obligations more efficiently.

Moreover, the research indicated that graduate education enhances classroom practices and teacher-child connections. Participants indicated an increase in intentionality, responsiveness, and supportiveness in their interactions with children following the application of concepts acquired from their master's coursework. This study aligns with AlHussaini et al. (2024), who discovered that professional development improves teachers' socio-emotional competency and instructional practices in classroom environments. Wu et al. (2026) similarly highlighted that reflective practice and professional development enhance teacher-child interactions by fostering educators' responsiveness to children's developmental and emotional requirements. The results of the present study indicate that higher education enhances pedagogical understanding and fosters the creation of more supportive and child-focused classroom settings.

A significant discovery of the study was the participants' transition towards prioritizing play-based and child-centered learning methodologies. Educators articulated how graduate education reshaped their convictions about pedagogy and cognition, especially concerning the significance of play in children's development. This discovery corresponds with Benemerito (2025), who elucidated that professional development fosters educators' adoption of more inclusive, child-centered, and developmentally appropriate pedagogical philosophies. Engagement with modern educational theories, reflective dialogues, and evidence-based approaches seems to shape teachers' perceptions of learning in early childhood education. Consequently, educators are more inclined to choose educational methods that emphasize children's active engagement, creativity, and socio-emotional development.

The data indicated that obtaining a master's degree substantially enhances personal and professional development. Participants indicated increased self-confidence, improved classroom management abilities, heightened leadership preparedness, and a more profound comprehension of children's developmental requirements. These findings corroborate Sheridan et al. (2009), who highlighted that professional development enhances instructors' comprehension of child development





and refines classroom management techniques. Furthermore, Cadime et al. (2025) validated that advanced training improves developmental awareness and instructional proficiency among educators. The present study emphasizes that graduate education transcends academic success; it fosters reflective practice, the building of professional identity, and leadership development in early childhood educators.

The findings indicate that advanced graduate education acts as a transforming experience for early childhood educators. Despite the considerable challenges teachers face regarding time management and workload, the enduring professional advantages—including enhanced instructional methodologies, fortified teacher-child relationships, improved reflective practices, and heightened professional confidence—underscore the importance of ongoing professional development in early childhood education.

Knowledge Contribution

This study investigates how early childhood educators at Tubod College grow as professionals, and it doesn't just stop at the surface. It brings together fresh evidence for theory, real-world data, and hands-on application, all tied to professional development.

Theoretical Contribution

Instead of just focusing on skills, the research looks at the bigger picture of professional identity. It explores the transformative role of graduate studies in reshaping how educators perceive their roles. By connecting personal motivation with what actually happens in the classroom, the study sheds new light on what it means to be a professional in Early Childhood Education, especially in a local setting.

Empirical Contribution

There's not a lot of research like this in the Philippines, especially at the regional level. This study changes that. It captures what drives educators to keep learning, what holds them back, and the unique challenges they face right where they work.

There are some key takeaways: Academic rigor and teaching confidence go hand in hand. Many educators juggle work and graduate studies, but certain patterns help them push through. Local economic factors play a big role in whether educators can finish advanced degrees.

Practical Contribution (Institutional Support Program) Based on the findings, the study proposes a structured Institutional Support Program to facilitate teacher growth:

1. Mentorship: Give educators one-on-one guidance as they pursue higher degrees.
2. Resources: Offer study leaves and real financial support.
3. Peer Networks: Build spaces where teachers can lean on each other, so they're not going it alone.

Policy Implications: These findings make a strong case for weaving teacher development into school improvement plans. The study recommends:

1. Standardized Incentives: Set aside money for tuition help or pay bumps when teachers finish grad school.
2. Monitoring: Keep track of how many teachers are working toward advanced degrees, and see how that affects students.
3. Broader Rollout: Use this approach as a test run, and adapt it for other regional colleges to see if it boosts teacher quality across the board.

Future Research Contribution

Looking ahead, the study points out where we should focus next:

1. Long-term Impact: Assessing the long-term effects of Master's degrees on teacher retention and student achievement.
2. Comparative Trials: Test out which support systems help teachers finish their degrees, and whether mentorship works better than financial aid.
3. Broader Testing: See if these strategies hold up in different schools and regions across the Philippines.



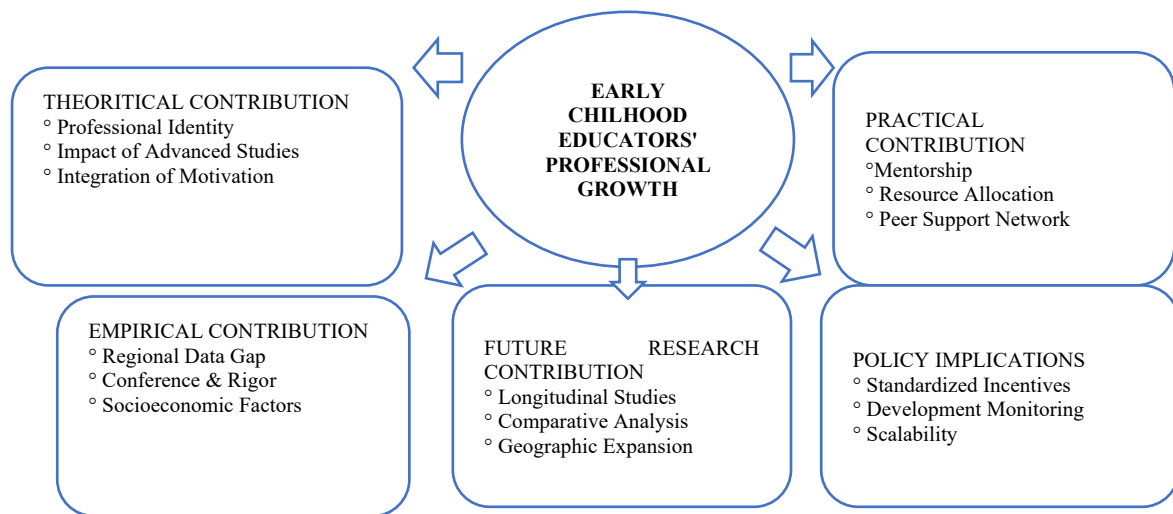


Figure 2. Early Childhood Educators' Professional Growth Framework

Conclusion

The pursuit of a Master's degree among early childhood educators at Tubod College is driven by a profound desire for professional transformation rather than mere credentialism. This study concludes that while Career Advancement is a primary motivator, the journey is defined by a significant "work-study struggle" where teachers balance exhaustive classroom duties with rigorous academic demands. The findings reveal that advanced education serves as a critical catalyst for shifting teacher identities from traditional, instructor-led roles to pedagogical leaders who prioritize child-centered and play-based learning. However, the potential of these educators is often capped by a lack of institutional flexibility and standardized financial support. To bridge this gap, this study concludes that: Structured Support is Mandatory: For teachers to effectively implement their advanced knowledge, schools must provide "looser timetables" and formal mentorship. Incentivization Drives Retention: The implementation of Return Service Agreements paired with standardized pay increments creates a sustainable ecosystem for professional growth. Regional Significance: By addressing the localized experiences of teachers in Lanao del Norte, this research provides a necessary template for rural teacher development policies across the Philippines. Ultimately, obtaining a Master's degree is more than an academic milestone; it is a foundational shift in the quality of early childhood education that requires systemic support to achieve its full scientific and social impact.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the professional landscape of Early Childhood Education:

For School Administrators and Policymakers Establish a "Return Service Agreement" (RSA): To ensure a return on investment, schools should offer tuition subsidies or "study leave with pay" in exchange for a mandatory service period (e.g., two years of service for every one year of funded study). This mitigates the "brain drain" and encourages institutional loyalty. Flexible Scheduling and Looser Timetables: Administrators should provide a "Graduate Study Track" for faculty, allowing for reduced teaching loads or shifted hours on seminar days to improve the Work-Life Balance (Mean: 4.10) identified in this study. Standardized Incentives: Create a clear policy for automatic salary grade increases upon completion of the degree to maintain high motivation levels.

For Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs), Reflective Curriculum Design: Master's programs should explicitly integrate Reflective Practice into their coursework to help teachers bridge the gap between theory and the "lived experience" of the classroom. Mentorship Programs: TEIs should



facilitate peer networks where veteran graduate students mentor new enrollees, specifically regarding time-management strategies for the "work-study struggle.

For Teachers Collaborative Leadership: Graduates are encouraged to transition from classroom teachers to Pedagogical Leaders, sharing child-centered strategies with colleagues to amplify the "Scientific Impact" of their degree within their local school.

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