

Elementary Teachers' Lived Experiences with the Department of Education's Project DEAR (Drop Everything and Read): Toward Developing Supplementary Materials

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of elementary teachers implementing Project DEAR at Bayombong Central School and SPED Center in Nueva Vizcaya. Through purposive sampling, twelve in-service teachers from grades 1-6 with advisory roles and at least two years of teaching experience participated in the research. Employing thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's methodology, the study revealed that teachers face significant challenges including insufficient reading materials, overwhelming workloads, unclear directives, and inconsistent administrative support. Despite these obstacles, many educators developed creative, learner-centered approaches and observed improvements in students' reading fluency and engagement. Teachers recommended a comprehensive approach to enhance Project DEAR through collaborative planning, continuous professional development, active parental involvement, motivational strategies, and combined assessment methods validated by school officials. Based on these findings, the study led to the creation of a Self-Directed Learning Material (SDLM) as a key outcome, designed specifically to address implementation gaps identified through teachers' experiences. This research provides valuable insights for improving literacy initiatives through enhanced resource allocation, clearer implementation guidelines, and stronger stakeholder collaboration to foster sustainable reading cultures in elementary education.

Keywords: literacy intervention, elementary education, phenomenological study, reading engagement, self-directed learning material

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, technology has significantly influenced learners' habits and interests, often diverting their attention from traditional reading to digital platforms like social media and online games. Technology offers modern teaching methods that can engage learners effectively (Nimer & Napil, 2024). However, this shift poses challenges for educators striving to cultivate a love for reading among students.

Reading, as a foundational macro skill, is crucial for the development of other skills such as writing, speaking, and listening. Studies emphasized that reading enriches vocabulary and comprehension, which in turn enhances overall literacy (Deluao et al., 2022; Saquing, 2018). However, reading comprehension has become a global concern, with difficulties in multilingual and under-resourced contexts (Afzal, 2019; Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Jamshidifarsani et al., 2019; Naga et al., 2020).

To address these challenges, various interventions have been implemented worldwide. One notable program is Project DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), which allocates specific times for independent reading in schools. This initiative has shown positive outcomes in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, enhancing students' reading habits and classroom environments (Prasetyaningrum & Ruminar, 2020; Abdullah & Haron, 2019). In the Philippines, adaptations like DEAR MARY at Saint Mary's University Grade School aim to foster a love for reading among diverse learners. Additionally, the Department of Education's "Catch-Up Friday" initiative focuses on improving reading comprehension through dedicated strategies (DM No. 001 s. 2024).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly in resource-limited settings where teachers often face difficulties in planning, execution, and sustaining reading programs. Studies highlight the importance of teacher collaboration, training, and flexibility in overcoming these obstacles (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Hao & Lee, 2021; Foster & Hall, 2023). Moreover, parental involvement plays a significant role in enhancing students' reading strategies and performance (De Jesus & Hernandez, 2023; Reganit & Ascano, 2023).

In addition to these, motivation strategies, including the use of rewards, have been identified as effective in promoting reading engagement. Research indicates that personalized rewards can transition students from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, fostering a genuine interest in reading (Sigalingging et al., 2023). However, it is essential to balance extrinsic rewards to avoid undermining intrinsic motivation, as highlighted by the over justification effect (Lepper et al., 1973).

This research aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of educators implementing Project DEAR, assessing its impact and effectiveness. The study seeks to provide recommendations and extension activities to enhance the program's implementation, ensuring it effectively addresses reading challenges among learners.

Benefits of Reading

Recent studies underscore the critical role of reading proficiency in academic success and cognitive development. Hicks (2023) found a positive correlation between reading habits and academic achievement, suggesting that students who read more tend to perform better academically. Similarly, Dewitz and Graves (2021) highlighted the effectiveness of teaching comprehension strategies, such as questioning and summarizing, in enhancing students' reading comprehension. In their paper, Chin et al. (2024) emphasized that motivation, another significant factor that influences learners' reading comprehension, with students who read for enjoyment and self-satisfaction engaging more deeply with texts. Furthermore, research indicates that reading physical books, as opposed to digital formats, can lead to better comprehension and retention, possibly due to the tactile and immersive experience they provide (Altamura, Vargas, & Salmerón, 2023). Additionally, reading for just six minutes a day has been associated with improved brain clarity, reduced stress levels, and better sleep quality, contributing to overall well-being (Martinez, 2020). These findings collectively highlight the multifaceted benefits of reading, encompassing academic, cognitive, and emotional domains

Teachers' Lived Experiences in Teaching Reading

In the realm of reading comprehension, Canas et al. (2019) highlight the significant influence teachers have in developing pupils' abilities, utilizing their experiences and instructional practices to enhance reading skills. McDowall (2022) further notes that teachers who engage in personal reading for enjoyment can effectively model reading practices, creating an environment conducive to student engagement and motivation. Additionally, Nguyen (2022) identifies strategies such as questioning, predicting, recounting, and imagining as effective methods to improve pupils' reading comprehension levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges to reading instruction. Taglucop (2023) observed that pre-pandemic reading approaches, including activities like Read-A-Thon and DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), were more varied and interactive. During the pandemic, however, teachers faced limitations, relying more on virtual learning environments and home reading tasks. Presquito and Madrigal (2022) reported that teachers struggled to manage children with reading issues in online settings, underscoring the importance of innovative techniques and family participation. Post-pandemic, educators continue to face challenges. David and Ali (2022) found that many intermediate pupils struggle

with foundational reading skills and fluency, suggesting that intensive reading comprehension is better developed in face-to-face classroom settings. Amar et al. (2024) also revealed that teachers are still grappling with students' attitudes and learning post-pandemic, continually seeking ways to encourage and support their students.

Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Reading

Teachers in the Philippines face numerous challenges in teaching reading, significantly impacting students' literacy development. Studies by Haile and Mendisu (2023), Lemana et al. (2023), and Lu (2022) highlight issues such as inadequate teaching materials, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of support from school staff and parents. These factors contribute to difficulties in addressing students' diverse reading needs. Nonetheless, the Department of Education (DepEd) has recognized the urgency of improving reading proficiency, with Vice President Sara Duterte emphasizing the need for dedicated reading days in schools to address this issue. In response, DepEd launched Project DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) as part of its efforts to enhance learners' academic performance, particularly in reading, as outlined in DepEd Memorandum No. 001, s. 2024. This initiative aims to provide structured reading time to improve students' literacy skills and bridge learning gaps. However, implementing such programs presents its own set of challenges, including the need for adequate resources, teacher preparedness, and community involvement. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort from educators, policymakers, and communities to create a supportive environment conducive to effective reading instruction.

This study determined the lived experiences of teachers as implementers of the Project DEAR in terms of planning, implementation, and evaluation towards crafting supplementary materials. The study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2024-2025. It sought to determine the lived experiences of the teachers as implementers of the Project DEAR in terms of planning, implementation, and evaluation and their recommendations to enhance the project in the said areas. Ultimately, it aimed to craft supplementary reading materials to enhance the implementation of Project DEAR based on elementary teachers' lived experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of elementary teachers in planning, implementing, and evaluating Project DEAR (Drop-Everything-And-Read). The phenomenological method was chosen to gain deep insights into teachers' perceptions, challenges, benefits, and recommendations regarding Project DEAR, enabling the researchers to develop supplementary teaching and learning materials aligned with teachers' actual experiences. The study was conducted at Bayombong Central School and SPED Center in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Region II. The participants consisted of twelve in-service elementary teachers, two representing each grade level from grades 1 to 6, purposively selected based on their involvement in Project DEAR and a minimum of two years teaching experience. Teachers without advisory classes, part-time or substitute teachers, those not currently teaching elementary students, or those on leave were excluded to ensure the study focused on experienced, actively involved educators capable of providing reliable insights. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers, containing open-ended questions aligned with DepEd Memorandum No. 001, s. 2024, which governs the implementation of Catch-up Friday. The interview instrument underwent content validation by the research adviser and panel for clarity, neutrality, and relevance, resulting in minor revisions such as verb tense adjustments and inclusion of a section for teacher recommendations. Following approval, coordination with the

school principal facilitated participant identification and interview scheduling during teachers' free periods, typically held in their classrooms from January 14 to March 14, 2025.

Prior to interviews, participants were fully briefed on the study's objectives, ethical considerations, and their rights, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and withdrawal without penalty. Written informed consent was secured from all participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent to ensure accurate transcription. The semi-structured format allowed for probing and clarification, conducted respectfully in a quiet environment. To enhance efficiency and focus, each researcher interviewed different participants.

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English as needed. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis: familiarization with data through repeated reading and note-taking, initial open coding to identify meaningful segments, axial coding to group related codes into categories, reviewing and refining categories into overarching themes, defining and naming these themes to clearly reflect the data, and finally reporting findings supported by direct participant quotes. An independent data analyst reviewed the findings to confirm accuracy and credibility.

Ethical approval was granted by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board (SMUREB). The researchers ensured participants' confidentiality, privacy, and voluntary participation throughout the study. All data were securely stored and would be deleted after the study's conclusion. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions, and support was provided if any participant experienced discomfort during the process. No conflicts of interest existed as the research was conducted solely to enhance teaching and learning materials. The study posed no risks to participants but instead offered benefits by contributing valuable insights to improve reading programs, thereby positively impacting the educational community. Moreover, the research study was not funded. The study bore the name of Saint Mary's University, along with the names of the researchers and their adviser. The crafted supplementary materials were disseminated to Bayombong Central School and SPED Center with documentation. These activities took place during the second semester of Academic Year 2024-2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Section 1. Lived Experiences of Teachers in Project DEAR in Terms of Planning, Implementation, and Recommendation

Table 1

Summary of Lived Experiences of Teachers in Project DEAR in Terms of Planning, Implementation, and Recommendation

Themes	Category
Planning	
Insufficient Provision of Reading Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of available reading materials ● Received reading resources from stakeholders
Implementation	
Challenges in Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overburdened Teachers ● Implementation Gaps
Learner-Centered Reading Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Instructional Strategies and Engagement ● Learner Grouping and Differentiation
Evaluation	
Assessment and Reading Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assessment and Monitoring ● Reading Outcomes and Improvements

Table 1 summarizes the themes regarding the lived experiences of teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the Project DEAR. These lived experiences revealed a dynamic interplay of challenges, adaptations, and outcomes, captured through several interrelated themes and categories. In terms of planning, one theme with two categories was elicited. There were two themes with four categories in implementation while in terms of evaluation, there was one identified theme with three categories

A central theme that emerged was the insufficient provision of reading materials, which greatly hindered the readiness and confidence of teachers. Many shared that they were tasked with implementing the program without receiving appropriate or leveled reading resources. This lack forced them to either create materials from scratch, spend their own money, or seek support from stakeholders, which was often limited to basic supplies like bond paper and ink. Although some teachers acknowledged small acts of support from schools or NGOs, these were not sufficient to meet the demand for ready-to-use, age-appropriate reading content—highlighting a systemic gap between administrative directives and classroom realities.

Teachers also faced significant implementation challenges, especially in managing the additional responsibilities imposed by Project DEAR. Many described feeling overwhelmed and overburdened, with the program adding to their already heavy workload and competing with other school initiatives. The lack of clear, consistent guidelines and shifting administrative expectations led to confusion, misalignment, and frustration. Procedural gaps—such as unclear scheduling, disrupted assessments, and limited parent engagement—further complicated the implementation process. The inconsistency in leadership and unclear communication from administrators were repeatedly cited as barriers, creating instability in how the program was executed across classrooms.

Despite these obstacles, teachers exhibited strong resilience and adaptability by embracing learner-centered approaches to maintain student engagement. They applied creative instructional strategies, such as interactive reading corners, games, group reading, and story retelling. Teachers also emphasized the importance of student choice in book selection and introduced flexible reading activities that aligned with learners' interests. These strategies transformed what could have been a passive reading exercise into a more engaging and inclusive experience. Furthermore, teachers practiced learner grouping and differentiation, carefully assessing their students' reading levels and designing interventions based on those assessments. Whether through peer teaching, tiered reading materials, or targeted support for SPED learners, these practices ensured that every child—regardless of reading ability—had the opportunity to participate and grow.

A crucial component of these experiences was assessment and monitoring, which teachers used not only to measure student progress but also to refine their own instructional methods. Tools like the Phil-IRI and EGRA were used alongside oral comprehension checks, observation, rubrics, and learner self-monitoring to track improvement and adapt instruction. Teachers noted significant reading gains among students, especially struggling readers, within just a few weeks of consistent implementation. These improvements were reflected in reading fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension, reinforcing the value of structured reading time and ongoing evaluation.

Finally, teachers offered mixed reflections on the overall impact of Project DEAR. Many recognized its potential, citing visible improvements in students' reading skills, increased engagement, and the development of positive reading habits. However, others pointed out that without strong administrative support, clear direction, and sustained resource provision, the program risked becoming another burden on already stretched educators. The lived experiences

of these teachers underscore the importance of aligning educational policies with classroom realities. For initiatives like Project DEAR to succeed, they must be supported by thoughtful planning, consistent implementation frameworks, and a commitment to equipping teachers with the tools and autonomy they need to create meaningful literacy experiences.

Section 2. Teachers' Recommendations in the Planning, Implementation and Evaluation of Project DEAR

Table 2

Summary of Teachers' Recommendations in the Planning, Implementation and Evaluation of Project DEAR

Themes	Category
Planning Collaboration and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher Training and Collaboration ● Teacher Resourcefulness and Adaptation
Implementation Partnership and Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Parental Involvement and Support ● Motivation and Rewards
Evaluation Comprehension Assessment with External Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Comprehension Test ● Need of External Evaluator

Table 2 summarizes the themes regarding the teachers' recommendations in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the Project DEAR. In terms of planning, one theme with two categories was elicited. Under implementation, there was one theme with two categories while in terms of evaluation, there was one identified theme with two categories.

Through their hands-on experiences with Project DEAR, teachers have gained valuable insights into what makes the program both effective and meaningful. One key recommendation is to promote a strong culture of collaboration and resourcefulness within schools. They highlight the importance of regular Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, peer mentoring, and the sharing of classroom-tested materials as effective ways to align all teachers with the program's goals and strategies. In addition, they emphasize the need for flexibility and encourage teacher resourcefulness—such as repurposing available materials, localizing content to reflect students' backgrounds, and designing new reading aids—to ensure the program remains responsive to the diverse needs of each classroom.

Teachers also highlight the value of strengthening home-school partnerships. They recommend increasing parental involvement through book donations, home reading routines, and participation in orientation sessions. These practices not only extend literacy support beyond the classroom but also foster a shared responsibility for student reading development. In addition, teachers observe that simple incentives—such as stars, stickers, bookmarks, and praise—are highly effective in motivating students and cultivating a love for reading. They recommend that such reward systems be sustained and even enhanced.

To ensure the integrity of student assessments and support continuous improvement, teachers advocate for comprehensive and meaningful evaluation practices. These include oral questioning, higher-order thinking activities, and the use of standardized tools like Phil-IRI. To further enhance credibility, they recommend involving external evaluators such as school heads or district officials to validate reading progress objectively. These recommendations reflect teachers' belief that with the right support, collaboration, and consistent monitoring, Project DEAR can achieve greater success in developing literacy among learners.

Section 3. Self-Directed Reading Material as a Supplementary Material in the Implementation of Project DEAR

The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines has implemented "Catch-Up Fridays" as part of its National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP), aiming to address learning gaps in reading and other foundational skills. This initiative, guided by DepEd Memorandum No. 001, s. 2024, designates all Fridays throughout the school year for activities focusing on reading, values, health, and peace education.

Within this framework, Project DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) is a key component that emphasizes independent reading to enhance literacy skills. To support this, researchers have developed self-directed reading materials titled "Once Upon a Reader." These materials consist of eight age-appropriate stories featuring animals and familiar objects, structured into five sections: a title page, an "Unlocking Difficulties" segment to pre-teach key vocabulary, a "Motive Question" to spark curiosity, the main story, and a concluding moral lesson. Each story includes "Pop-questions" to prompt reflection and comprehension, and a page for learners to note unfamiliar words, aiding teachers in providing targeted instruction.

The self-directed nature of these materials promotes autonomy in literacy development, allowing learners to engage with reading activities independently. This approach aligns with educational research emphasizing the benefits of self-directed learning in promoting motivation and self-regulation. Even if Project DEAR is no longer formally implemented, these materials can still be effectively utilized within the national reading program to support learners' literacy development.

Conclusion

Elementary teachers encounter significant challenges including lack of ready-made and leveled reading materials and often relying on personal resources or minimal stakeholder support. They face overwhelming workloads, unclear directives, and inconsistent administrative backing, though many still employ creative, learner-centered strategies. Despite using varied assessment tools that showed improvements in reading fluency and engagement, the program's overall effectiveness is hindered by inconsistent support and implementation gaps. Hence, elementary teachers recommend a multifaceted approach encompassing planning, implementation, and evaluation. Effective planning involves collaborative efforts among teachers, continuous professional development, and resourcefulness in adapting to diverse learning needs. During implementation, active parental involvement and the use of motivational strategies, such as rewards and recognition, are crucial for supporting learner's engagement and promoting a culture of reading. For evaluation, combining oral and written assessments with validation from school or district officials ensures fairness and accuracy. Overall, Project DEAR is most effective when supported by strong planning, school-home collaboration, student motivation, and credible assessment practices. Finally, as supplementary materials, the self-directed reading materials crafted can enhance the implementation of Project DEAR based on elementary teachers' lived experiences.

Recommendations

Educational institutions need to provide access to suitable reading resources for every grade. Enhanced collaboration with community groups, local publishers, and benefactors can assist in overcoming the shortage of materials. For the Department of Education, the implementation of Project DEAR should be supported by clear guidelines, adequate training, and consistent monitoring. This approach will ensure the program is successfully implemented in every school and that educators receive the necessary support. For teacher development, professional development sessions should be conducted to assist educators in engaging diverse

types of learners. These sessions ought to cover methods for reading assessments, fostering a supportive reading atmosphere, and collaborating closely with families. Educators will have the chance to apply these self-guided resources in their classrooms and reflect on their effectiveness through practical application and self-evaluation. This methodology guarantees that teachers can evaluate the real-world impact of the strategies and modify them to cater to the specific requirements of their students. Moreover, parents ought to be motivated to promote reading at home. They can achieve this by reading together with their kids, helping create a habit of regularly donating books, or participating in school events associated with Project DEAR.

It is essential that developers of reading materials create and provide additional reading materials that are enjoyable, relevant, and appropriate for various learner levels. Materials such as storybooks, worksheets, and digital materials can assist students in connecting more with reading. The materials should be contextualized and localized to enhance the learning experience by relating the content to the students' own culture, experiences, and surroundings. The names of the characters in the story should be given context, such as using names like "Nena, Suping," and so on, as well as adapting the characters to the local setting by replacing the fox with an "oso."

For future researchers, they can consider utilizing a mixed-methods approach by combining both qualitative insights and quantitative data in studies of literacy. For example, merging teacher stories with students' reading assessments can provide a clearer understanding of how teaching techniques impact reading growth. This method provides a more comprehensive and data-driven foundation for enhancing future reading initiatives. In addition to conducting interviews, future researchers could also integrate direct observations of classrooms during reading activities. This would yield deeper insights into how educators conduct reading sessions, apply techniques, and tackle challenges as they arise. Moreover, they could carry out comprehensive studies to evaluate the effectiveness of self-created materials developed by researchers. This research should yield in-depth insights and evidence-based recommendations for adjustments based on empirical evidence. Such studies should include learners in Key Stage 1 to thoroughly assess the effectiveness, adaptability, and versatility of these resources among diverse learner groups with varying educational needs and backgrounds. Ultimately, examining the implementation of DEAR across different school contexts, including rural or multi-grade classrooms, could result in more effective and adaptable program designs.

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